Language: The Crucial Instrument of Social Control

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ABSTRACT

Language as a ‘sign’ system is not simply an arbitrary relation between signifier and signified, but an ideologically motivated system of signs, which controls and shapes all the social realities. The paper shows that the linguistic discursive practices are ideological in that they produce and reproduce unequal power relations in the way they represent and classify the world around us. Finally, this paper concludes that there exist ideologically driven forces in our society that promote specific types of language use for social control.

সারাংশ

চিহ্ন ব্যবস্থা হিসেবে ভাষা কেবলমাত্র চিহ্নি এবং চিহ্নিতের মধ্যকার একটা কার্যকারিতা সম্পর্ক নয়। বরং, একে দেখা উচিত মতাধর্মিত চিহ্ন ব্যবস্থা হিসেবে - যে ব্যবস্থা সামাজিক বাণ্ডবার রূপান্তর এবং নিয়ন্ত্রণ মূল ভূমিকা পালন করে। এই রকম একটা অবস্থায় দাড়িয়ে, এই আলোচনার বিষয় হলো ঐভূত: কেবল মাত্র ভাষাই যে মতাধর্মিত চিহ্ন এক চিহ্ন ব্যবস্থা তা নয়। ভাষা সংক্রান্ত যে ভাষার প্রকল্প রয়েছে তারাও কোনো না কোনো একজনের মতাধর্মিত রূপান্তর ও নিয়ন্ত্রণের নিদর্শ। মতাধর্মিত রূপান্তর ও নিয়ন্ত্রনের এই ব্যাপার তাই ঠিক পেয়েছে রাজনৈতিক (অর্থাৎ) ইচ্ছার প্রস্তুতিও।

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Neither power nor knowledge nor any other reality is anything but a mere linguistic construct.
~Foucault

1. Introduction

Language is a great force of socialisation, integrated component of culture, symbol of social and cultural identity, a mode of communication and representation. Languages have a deep connection to the thought and culture of the people who speak them and every language divides the world differently. The present work is an attempt to argue and question these traditional notions of communication and representation of language. It argues that the linguistic system of signs is not simply an unbiased reflection of the world but a product of ideologies of culture. The concept of “variation” is not as Saussure believed a product of individual choice but a product of social differentiation. Saussure argued that everyone has equal excess to langue, and the homogeneities of langue are achieved not innate. Language as a sign system is not simply an arbitrary relation between signifier and signified, but an ideologically motivated system of signs, which controls and shapes all the social realities. In fact, language can be used to control the way people think. At the individual level, it is very common for a person who wishes to assert his/her authority and superiority to use longer words to impress, to intimidate or perhaps to mystify and confuse the audience. Malinowski has rightly described language as a “mode of action” rather than a “counter-sign to thought”. This paper raises some issues regarding how language as a powerful tool is used to shape and re-shape realities, beliefs, and worldviews and how it acts as a complete tool of social control, conditioned by “other” non-linguistic parts of society. To substantiate the claims argued, different discourses (both linguistic and non-linguistic) have been taken into consideration and an attempt has been made to show how language controls all arenas of life overtly or covertly. It is a challenging intellectual task to question such ideologies of culture and people, because the people who question the dominant ideology often appear not to make sense; what they say would not sound logical to anyone who holds that ideology. In extreme cases, people who ask such questions may even appear mad. The most general premise of this paper is that there exist some ideologically driven forces in our society that promote specific types of language use for social control.

2. The Dominance Factor

According to Ruiz (1984, 1990), language(s) can be seen in three ways:
(a) language as a problem,
(b) language as a right,
(c) language as a resource.

The present study aims to expose the core issues that underpin views of language as a problem and how they, in turn, result in the formation of policies that represent social communication patterns. The important question, which one can raise, is about the logical and structural dominance of one language over the other, standard over the non-standard, one variety over the other or a language over its dialects. Interestingly, what we call appropriate and correct is not a property of linguistic structures but their relationship with contexts. It is not the structure of the word, which carries the meanings, but settings and contexts in which it is used are also important. There is a systematic co-variance between linguistic structures and social structures, a kind of mapping speech against various social facts. We
usually exploit the affective aspect of language, when we have many utterances in mind to convey the same message but ‘selecting one as appropriate’ and not another is showing ourselves to be sensitive to power and social relationships between us and the individuals or groups we are addressing.

However, the question arises that why a particular linguistic from attracts affirmative adjectives like good, correct, pure, proper, educated, articulate and intelligent. Is the notion of standard ‘logically’ and structurally superior or a mere covert construction? Is there any relation between notion of standard and ordered world? Why is standard associated with authority, discipline, social and moral order, its speakers perceived as educated, having respect for societies’ standards and norms? It would not be illegitimate to argue that, because they support power therefore “inclusion” is that they are part of socially powerful group. Why the standard invalidates the “other” (regional/vernacular/indigenous) dialects. Bloomfield (1927) described ‘illiterate speech as no more haphazard than any other variety, its users had learned no less but had learned something different. Labov rejected ungrammaticality of everyday speech as myth. Similarly, the cognitive superiority of Standard English was unproven. Linguistically, dialect forms where no more haphazard or unstable and no easier to learn. For example, to learn “I seen” and “I saw” are equally affordable and difficult to learn. Prestigious is not always aesthetic and authentic. Why was the double negation (I didn’t say nothing) acceptable in 17th century (to mean I dint say anything) and unacceptable in present English. Purists attempted to justify it by applying mathematical rules and argued that two negatives make a positive therefore the double negation I didn’t say nothing is not acceptable in English language. Nevertheless, the question is can mathematical rules be applied to language. For instance, the question one may ask is: can truth and false value of language be checked by applying mathematical rules? Obviously, not, language and the meaning it conveys is context bound, and its truth-values unlike mathematical rules can be directly judged from the real world experiences. There are no “primitive” languages. All languages have a system of sounds, words, and sentences that can adequately communicate the content of culture. The languages of the so-called “primitive” peoples are often very complex in their grammatical structures. There seems to be no correlation between a language’s grammatical complexity and the technological level of a society or other aspects of culture. Nevertheless, cultures that have more complex, diverse economies and advanced technologies have larger vocabularies.

Santa Ana’s (2002) analysis of metaphorical rhetoric used in the Los Angeles Times during the 1990s is an excellent example of how the media are used to influence the formation of public policy. A striking metaphor offered by Santa Ana is ‘Language as a Prison: “They consider English fluency the key to unlock the handcuffs of poverty, a key they themselves will probably never possess” (Santa Ana, 2002; Johnson, 2003, 2005). The above metaphor entails that languages other than English are bad: they keep speakers in poverty, and they inhibit progress and those who speak them are limited and unfortunate. On the opposite side of the spectrum, it implies that English is good: it is a tool to escape, and it is freedom and those who speak English are liberated from oppression. It is about the use of power and influences to control broader social patterns of language use.

3. Hegemonic and Ideological Manipulation

The topic of language ideology is a much-needed bridge between linguistic and social theory, because it relates the micro culture of communicative action to political economic considerations of power and social inequality, confronting macro social constraints on language behavior (P Kroskirty, Personal Communication). A number of public problems center on language ideology for example the questions of free speech and harassment; the meaning of multiculturalism in schools and texts etc.

Research on topics such as pronouns, politeness, and purism has begun the difficult program of considering whose interests are served by linguistic ideology taking the form that it does, relating notions of linguistic ideology as rooted in linguistic structure and cognitive limitations to
understandings of ideology as rooted in social practices and interests. It is the attempt to link these two aspects of ideology, and to tie social and linguistic forms together through ideology, that is both most provocative and most challenging. It may not be an exaggeration to consider language as a system by which powerful participants control non-powerful participants. The question of “who” is allowed to say “what” to “whom” is related with power and social status, to demonstrate power through language. Would it not be so or would language had been so simply a way of communication, Emmett Till an African-American teenager from Chicago in 1995 would not had been was murdered by two white men because he didn’t address them as “sir”. Until had unknowingly broken the social code that required African-Americans to defer to Anglo-Americans.

Language use or miss-use can lead to war and peace. Language controls all forms of life and Power whether it is derived from age, strength, wealth, or rank; it implies the possibility of control. For instance, in almost all cultures children are not allowed to ask the name of elders (as a mark of respect or not to insult) while elders can do the same. We are not always aware that our worldviews are being manipulated or directed by language, which makes it conceptually impossible to question certain values. Once accepted it becomes “commonsense” or truth and therefore unchallenged. As George Orwell rightly pointed out: “in our age there is no keeping out of politics. All issues are political issues”. Politics is concerned with power, the power to make decision, to control resources, to control other people’s behaviour and often to control their values. Language as a social fact reflects and regulates the social relationship. Language shapes reality thought it itself is shaped by environment. Worry is that this hidden ideologically motivated power is seen as neutral, normal, and invisible therefore remains unchallenged and unquestioned.

Another crucial debate about language ideology is regarding the language planning and policies and school circular using standard language (as there is no standard language- it is simply preferred status for social reasons alone and is hence closer to speech of some children than to that of others). “As ideological constructs,” asserts McCarty (2004), “language policies both reflect and (re)produce the distribution of power within the larger society”. By describing policy and ideology as social constructs, McCarty contends that they reflect the interests of the dominant group(s) and serve to maintain unequal relationships of power and access within the larger society. Language is defined here as a means of social control, a viewpoint by which language restrictions can be seen as a method of discriminating against speakers of minority languages. A government designates an official language to restrict access to economic and political power. As Denis Daoust has rightly argued that language planning is also transmission of cultural and social values. It is a deliberate and conscious effort, which involves hidden ideologies of economic and political aspects. It kills linguistic diversity and linguistic pluralism. It avoids choice. It is an accepted fact that socially powerful elite speak international language[s]. A dominant language group controls the crucial authority in the areas of administration politics and economy and gives preference in employment to those who have command of dominant language. This disadvantaged language group is been left with only two choices of assimilating or resisting. Usually weak language groups tend towards assimilation while stronger groups preferred political resistance. In all multilingual communities there is always an unequal treatment of languages hence not all language are being treated equally.

4. Linguistic Objectification

The concept of linguistic objectification is that how language objectifies the world, and how it discriminatory categorizes individuals into groups and vice versa. Central vs. marginal- trying to show that some members are central and others are marginal. They have at least the potential to order the world to suit their own ends, the potential to construct a language, a reality, a body of knowledge in which they are central figures, the potential to legitimate their own primacy, and to create a system of
beliefs which is beyond challenge. Linguistic practices are used primarily to demonstrate how they fall of central membership. We can explore the ways to know how language is used in social construction of reality and modes of life. For example, take the language used for age, different words are being for same age group person with all different nuances of meanings. Ageist language has ageist activities attached with it. It seems aging as a socially constructed process rather than biological ageing. In American expressions, senior citizens have positive connotations of active, strong, progressive, and happy the aged, elderly, and old person has negative connotations attached with it. Although much has been deliberated about the role of language in shaping the gendered realities, nonetheless, the contentious debate on gendered language cannot be ignored. Lakoff (1975) clearly identifies women’s language as responsible for causing women’s inferior social position and objectifies them differently as “other”. Language can be used to create asymmetrical relations between groups and individual. Language expresses the way the individuals situate themselves in relationship to others, the way they group themselves, they powers they claim for themselves. Linguistic choice of a speaker, convey social information, speakers position, background, place of origin, social class, social intent, whether s/he wants to appear friendly or distant, familiar or differential superior or inferior. Because of the relationship between language use and group membership, language can inspire deep group loyalties. It can serve as a symbol of unification on several levels. On the national level, language loyalty can serve an important political function. Many people in the United States are threatened by the use of languages other than English. To speak a language other than English is thought to be “un-American”.

5. Media Discourses: Shaping and Constructing the Realities

The powerful role and the effect of media language discourse in shaping, reshaping, and constructing of our worldviews and beliefs cannot be ignored. Media discourse is designed for mass audiences and sometimes producers don not know who are the audiences, which is not the case in case of face-to-face communication. Since all discourses are produced with some interpreters in mind but media discourse for an ideal subject. Actual listeners have to build a relationship with the ideal subject to interpret it. There is one-sidedness of media language discourses. In face-to-face communication participants can be both producers and interpreters of the text but in media discourses they are only consumers. In face-to-face communication, there is possibility of convergence or divergence, agreement or disagreement. We shape our speech style according to audience and even change it according to the feedback- but in media discourses, it is not possible.

Much has been said about the language of advertising, but actually, it alsoreshapes our thinking and beliefs. For example, the advertisement used for a cream “fair and lovely” in which a young girl is being showing confused because no one looks at her because she is not fair, but after applying the particular cream she becomes fair and all people get attracted towards her. It unconsciously gives legitimacy to that fact that only being fair is very important and acceptable and not being fair is unacceptable. Similarly, the advertisement of a car on an Indian television channel screening, propagating, and showing a well-dressed man and his family saying “life so complete now” after getting the particular car. Such type of advertisements intentionally or unintentionally, implicitly or explicitly demonstrate and attempt to legitimize that fact that without such type of cars life is incomplete and those people who don’t own such type of cars do not hold a complete life. It is interesting note that how media plays with the vocabularies, and it is always interesting to see how audience is to make belief. Who has said what is sometimes not clear. For example in discussions and news items the use of utterances like “it is thought” and “it is said” are used to make it true that the third and fourth hand information is absolute fact. For example, the various newspapers discussed the
news items vis-à-vis the serious political debate concerning the Indo-US nuclear deal in the following manner.

Experts are saying:
New Delhi shouldn’t sign the deal.
India shouldn’t sign the deal.
Our country shouldn’t sign the deal.
We shouldn’t sign the deal.

It is not just a news item with different lexical items meaning the same thing, but there is a deliberate and conscious use and preference of different words for the same news item by the people of different ideologies, who unwaveringly or explicitly want to convey that what they said, is the only correct thing. They try to prove that they speak on behalf of whole nation by using lexical items ‘our country’ and ‘we’. In other words, they employ linguistic items in such a fashion that lead to believe, as if they only know and represent of voice of the nation, hence what they speak is common-sense and therefore unchallenged, unquestioned and the only right way of doing things. It answers the question that how the notion of common sense contributes to the domination of some people by others. How relations of power can ideologically shape common sense assumptions. In the same Indo-US nuclear deal hot debate, the terminology used is ideologically motivated and loaded in such a way that it appears neutral, and beneficial, normal and less scary. These labels are deliberately used in order to eliminate the danger or deaths, which can be caused by nuclear threat and makes it difficult to talk about the nuclear industry in anything other than positive terms. The question is how can learning of such a language have powerful effect? It stops us to use the language to express our concerns make it conceptually impossible. This language dose not allows certain questions to be asked certain values to be expressed. We are not always aware that our worldviews are being manipulated. The fact is that language can be used to control the way people think. In political speeches the rhetorical use of pronouns we, our, I is mostly used for the safer positions and to avoid controversies. The first person mysterious pronoun we is used to avoid controversial statements as the US president used “we have win the war against the terror” when Afghanistan was attacked after 9/11. Similarly, the first person I is used for safer grounds and responsibility and claiming help as was used by the president Bush “I have send food packets and clothes to the children who have suffered in the collateral damage in Afghanistan”(CNN, June 22, 2002).

6. Conclusion

This sort of study of critical language discourses helps us in understanding the role of language in making and unmaking of beliefs and worldviews. As a matter of fact, arbitrariness of meaning system is hidden and meaning also varies ideologically. There is a difference between meaning of words in dictionary and meaning of words in discourse. For the interpretation of meaning, we should know Meaning of constituent parts, connection between sequential parts of text and connection between text and the world. We should understand the significance of language in production maintenance and change of social relations of power. Increase consciousness of how language contributes to the dominance of some people by others. Had language been simply a way of communication there would not have been scheduled and non-scheduled languages, standard and non-standard languages, national and regional languages, language dialect differences etc. Political, religious, social, and cultural characteristics would not have been associated with language. Therefore, it substantiates and legitimates the argument that language is a form of social practice, which makes and shapes and
controls all social realities rather than simply a mode of communication and representation and an abstract relation between sign and signifier.

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