# *MEDIA LANGUAGE AND THE CONSTRUCTION OF SELF/OTHER IN CONFLICT SITUATIONS*

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*"Speech is power: speech is to persuade, to convert, to compel."*
Ralph Waldo Emerson

***Abstract:*** *The role of the language used by the media is tremendous because, used skillfully or not, it enables spreading ideologies or starting competitions, leading society to progress or decay.*

*Therefore, the dichotomy "us" vs. "them" reflects, on the one hand, similarity with groups of people having common beliefs, ideas, purposes, and, on the other hand, opposition with others that are usually depicted by means of pejorative connotations.*

*The words used by the media are like tools, which can either build or destroy relations, societies and even identities. In conflict situations, the power relations can change very fast and, what seems one day as the ruling class can very well be, the following day, part of the oppressed.*

***Keywords:*** *self, other, conflict.*

The role of language is tremendous because, used skilfully or not, it enables spreading ideologies or starting competitions, leading society to progress or decay with the communicative role of language being always present. Language choice in media is more than obvious. People delivering speeches, writers or translators can exploit language to influence and convince, helping the ones using it to achieve specific objectives.

When we speak about conflict and language, we could think about the actors using the same language or a different one. Misunderstandings can appear from bilingual situations and improper command of the communication code. We should not consider the relation between words and conflicts just like a one-way relation, i.e. (from words leading to conflict), but also as a reversed one.

People interpret texts differently, according to their own systems of receiving and understanding information. For instance, some could pay attention to the numbers mentioned in a newspaper article, while others to location or statements and so on.

We do not live isolated, but in society and we describe ourselves better after getting in touch with other individuals. In the modern world, people have more freedom (of thought, of action), enabling them to better define their own identity. Similar to the hierarchy of needs established by Maslow (1943), people prioritize their values and purposes which guide them either in peacetime or conflict situations. The differences for this latter category are represented by ethos and pathos that increase.

Conflicts can only create great problems worldwide. How can they get global attention rather than by media (as a channel of sending information) and using codes (in our case words)?

These are like tools, which can be used either to build or destroy relations and societies. Even the same words can have distinct meanings to different people.

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"Language, per se, is a mutual factor here; what matters therefore are the varying interpretations of language in use in the community of speakers." (Suleiman, 2004: 26)

Words mean power, which can reach different extents for individuals/ groups. People need to be informed and not misinformed. They want to understand what is going on in the world, be up-to-date with the latest news, thus focusing on information rather than feelings. There are a lot of people that encounter these kinds of non-literary writings in their career and they need to thoroughly understand, analyze and interpret them. However, whether we want to admit it or not, some individuals just look for the information they need, without spending too much time analyzing it, considering like a product. In the "creation" stages, it can be distorted, because it deals with events, facts and reality. The level of materials should also be understood and meet the people's expectations. Stereotypes will always exist in the media, but it is up to the public to be aware of them.

People perceive the others according to their own system of beliefs. Cooley (1902) was the first to introduce the concept of "reflected or looking-glass self", which could be used as a starting point for discussions related to the "self" and "the other".

"A self-idea of this sort seems to have three principal elements: the imagination of our appearance to the other person; the imagination of his judgment of that appearance and some sort of self-feeling, such as pride or mortification." (1902: 152).

Humans create their own identity (ego), based on the opposition with the other (alter ego), concepts which were first popularized by Aristotle. According to Locke (1689), the identity of the self represents the continuous life of his body, but his components change through time.

Thomas Hobbes (1651) tried to explain the identity of the modern man. According to him, all people have physical and intellectual features, but their level from one individual to another is different. If two people want the same things, conflict appears between them.

The actors involved in the action may use labels to refer, to maintain, dismantle and build identities. By the connotative meanings of words, they offer to the public additional information needed for interpreting the meaning, referring both to the context and to the entities involved. In media discourse, nothing occurs randomly. Strategies for organizing written/ oral communication are considered.

There is no direct feedback coming from the audience and stereotypes are frequently encountered, meaning that the public has a certain image about the information that is to be found while reading or watching politicians delivering speeches.

Social relations are affected by conflict situations because new hierarchies are being established. Members of the opposing groups are viewed more at an extended level, as taking part in a larger entity which is better to fight against and try to preempt its prospective harmful actions. Notwithstanding, the efforts of the individuals belonging to the same group are considered as worthy of appraisal. Moreover, every single action for supporting the category they belong to or against "the others" seems to gain significance.

New actors may come or previous alliances may cease, because the strategies or plans established before cannot be implemented anymore, due to the changed realities. Each participating member of a group reassesses his specific role and either tries to maintain his present position or decides that it is more convenient not follow the provisions which were once agreed upon.



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Media discourse is usually clear, concise in order to reach a larger audience. Most of the time, for describing conflict situations, it includes words with negative connotations, such as: “panic”, “shock”, “violence”, giving the feeling of insecurity. When discussing about tense situations that occur inside the same country, media may choose to mention categories, i.e. “the Opposition” and “the Power”, with the former group wanting change and willing to fight in support of new ideas, to which the latter category does not appear to agree. If, “the Power” seems willing to negotiate and open for dialogue with protestors, this happens more like a final attempt to keep the authority and display an attitude that may convince the others of the fact that there are not two opposing groups.

For reference to the individuals fighting against oppressive regimes, media uses collective nouns such as: “crowds of demonstrators” or “group of protestors”, which give the idea of unity, of people belonging to the same category. When considering the other side of participants in a conflict, we can notice that journalists have a preference for mentioning the leader (either by using his name directly or by emphasizing his position, i.e. president, prime-minister) as well as his closest supporting group of people.

Politicians, that previously “stayed in the shadow”, may take advantage of insecure situations, in order to occupy leading positions, because they usually decide to join the winning side. Journalists often provide the public presentations, regarding the new members’ past actions and they even try to anticipate the future positions that these individuals may hold. In order to keep the impartiality of a text, this kind of prognosis is introduced as being “according to many analysts”, thus avoiding direct reference to a certain person or news agency.

News content, which comprises associations between words like “killings”, “nuclear bomb”, “terrorist” and the individuals involved, creates, most of the time, a partial image about the participants, because the events that are presented to the public, are chosen based on certain criteria, such as: limited space/ time for covering a topic and also careful choice of the words.

Conflict is usually correlated with violence and, the more similar words are associated to one group, the more negative the created image is. History proved that there were many political leaders asking for peaceful actions, for police/ security forces to protect human rights and the next day, it turned out that they were the ones who ordered opening fire against those who had dared to oppose them.

By means of media, almost anybody can express his opinions, because, in conflict situations, people become more daring, ready to fight for democracy or freedom. In news reports, the most catching phrases/ slogans are selected, in order to emphasize some ideas and, from a psychological perspective, to strengthen the power of a group, on the one hand, and diminish the one belonging to others, on the other hand.

Although the actors/ receivers of political discourse may seem to speak the same kind of language, at a closer look, it becomes obvious that they have different beliefs, ideas and expectations. What one side perceives as having a positive effect, the other may consider as opposite.

The language used in media shapes the public opinion. It changes the dynamics of society, influencing the way people think and act. When we read a newspaper article, we believe that what we read is true. However, to what extent is the vocabulary used in speeches or statements important?

“Meaning relating to culture and ideology may be implicit in a text, and can be expressed.” (Newmark, 1991: 31)



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In a world of ongoing changes, identity is constantly challenged; some aspects that were once considered differences can be accepted and understood nowadays, while new elements seem to make the distinction between categories.

"The human mind must think with the aid of categories….once formed, categories are the basis for normal prejudgment. We cannot possibly avoid this process. Orderly living depends on it." (Allport, 1954: 19)

People need to understand what is going on in the world. Categories enable them to establish similarities and differences, leading to better understanding of the information they get, either directly or indirectly. When media reports refer to the "actors" directly involved in the action, these are usually important individuals or groups of protestors, the crowd. Reference to this latter category is made by using figures (for example, 1000 people) or with the help of adjectives ("angry mob", "violent protestors"). The number of members belonging to one category can easily change, because, if people consider themselves as having goals similar to the ones from a certain group, they may decide to join them. On the other hand, if they realize that their views changed in time, they may even leave the group.

Those belonging to the "us" category usually call for action so that people decide to mobilize and not have the victimized status anymore. Members of one category are characterized by feelings of hatred or anger against oppressive regimes, while the others try to keep their authority, asking for peace. An example of this could be the slogans of the Romanian revolutionaries from 1989, such as: "We are the people. Down with the dictator", "Romanians come with us", "Students come with us" or how the dictator Nicolae Ceauşescu was addressing to the people by telling them "Stay at your places".

A similar event happened in the case of the Arab Spring, when the crowd from Tahrir Square, in Egypt chanted: "We have brought down the regime", Hosni Mubarak announced his resignation from being the president of the country. When conflict situations occur, leaders from all kinds of groups try to express their beliefs, hopes, expectations publically, most of the time by means of TV broadcasts, either asking for something (for example, people to join them) or to justify their past, present of future actions.

Protest movements can have a "domino" effect, because individuals from all regions can discover that they have similar attitudes or concepts with the ones provided by the media. Therefore, in the fight for a common cause, the number of people from one category increases and individuals become united on a basis regarding real-world problems (inequities coming from authorities, unemployment).

Media coverage of any conflict situation contributes not only to informing the audience, but also to shaping the people's opinions, to spreading ideologies. If, in the past, ideologies were imposed upon people by force, by occupying national territories and imprisoning those who dared to oppose/ fight and there were attempts to influence the way people thought, nowadays the methods used for these purposes are quite different.

The hardships, coming as consequences of oppressive regimes, make the people fight for freedom and wish for a better life, not only for them, but also for future generations. They are willing to die defending their country or the ideologies they believe in.

Friedrich Nietzsche in his essay "On the Genealogy of Morality", belonging to the late period of his writings (1887), made the distinction between two groups: "masters" which are seen as strong, proud, powerful and "the slaves" which are characterized as



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being weak, oppressed, developing a negative feeling ("resentiment") towards the former category.

Nowadays, the terms "slaves" or "masters" as hardly used to describe the power relations of the contemporary world, but the characteristics of the two groups are still kept.

We can think of an "important other", because, by comparing it to "the self", it can mean opposition with a rather powerful entity, but not to the same extent as to the "superior self".

The binary oppositional distinction "us" vs. "them" involves both a relation of inclusion (groups with similar ideology or interests) and one of exclusion (those who are seen as "different" from the former category). For proper analysis of the newspaper articles, a thorough analysis is needed which implies deeper understanding of the social, political, cultural and historical contexts.

Media reports regarding conflicts, due to their structure, require objectivity and their organization is highly predictable, i.e. some issues are presented occasionally, including past references, quotations. What is different is lexis, the choice of words and their combination. As to quotations, they are selected from an entire discourse, sometimes words missing from them, but the readers are not aware of their omission because they are changed to look compact.

Presidents of countries need to send their ideas to the citizens, sometimes worldwide. There is a widespread tendency to have a purpose when addressing to the audience. However, the target audience interpretations of an issue, their expectations are hard to anticipate. Political discourse follows the basic pattern of communication. It is called political because it refers to political ideas including specific details regarding ideologies or culture. The level of its understanding should be average because it is addressing a larger group of people, general audience.

> "Action and speech are so closely related because the primordial and specifically human act must at the same time contain the answer to the question asked of every newcomer: 'Who are you?' This disclosure of who somebody is, is implicit in both his words and his deeds. (...)" (Arendt, 1958: 158)

News is handy, most of the times free of charge, because the ones responsible for them get their money from advertising and not only.

Politicians appear on TV before elections, having campaigns, advisors suggesting them what to wear and how to behave and they even have specialists in body language or communication skills advising them. If we think of a candidate appearing in front of the public, with the sleeves of his shirt pulled up, doesn't he send us the message that he is ready for work, for action, open to receiving people's ideas or suggestions?

The level of diplomacy in political discourse is intrinsic. It separates aristocrats from common people. Journalists, editors should have critical awareness, this way being able to keep the objectivity of reporting.

Media processes, analyzes and sends information in real time to the public. The diversity of the materials contributes to shaping or changing opinions. When people speak of themselves, they have the tendency to do that as compared to "the others" which are characterized by means of pejorative connotations. In crisis situations, each category considers itself as being much better than the other one and tries to take over the control. What follows can be a sudden shift as referred to the power relations, because a winner from today can very well be a loser of tomorrow.



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"Power is *based* on privileged access to valued social resources, such as wealth, jobs, status, or indeed, a preferential access to public discourse and communication." (van Dijk, 1996: 85)

Distribution of power among the members of groups is neither linear, nor constant. Therefore, media language used for referring to categories undergoes continuous changes and it is the outcome of a redefinition process.

Conflict means there is a certain level of tension between groups or members. For proper interpretation of texts, people need to have thorough understanding of the background situation and of the contexts in which the events occurred.

"Discourse is not produced without context and cannot be understood without taking context into consideration." (Fairclough, Wodak, 1997: 277)

One important issue arises from the interaction with the other things or members of society: can "the self" maintain its characteristic features?

When media refers to leaders, organizations, protesters, nations, political parties, police or security forces, it usually does that by avoiding expressing opinions about one side or another, but, by means of the quotations or videos that they choose, they build the image of one category, by supporting it, whereas limiting the coverage, as referred to other categories.

The actors involved in the action learn to respond to the new threats and even anticipate future strategic movements because, if some events get international attention, hardly can they be stopped.

Many times people choose to fight because they believe in protecting their rights or they hope for a better future. The words used by the media to describe any conflict situation should be as objective as possible, not only to inform the audience, but also to present the identity of the actors involved. Words, through their magical powers, can change an entire world.

> "Growing up, I learned that it is a virtue to oppose injustice, inequality and unfairness. I was taught to read, research, to question, and never stop learning. I've never lost hope on our belief that our conflicts can be resolved through democratic means and not with violence. We have something to say about peace, and the power to make it a reality. We still do." Ayşe Berktay[‡‡‡‡‡‡‡‡‡]

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