

Point of View

Language, Discourse and Ideology

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Abstract

Language, discourse and ideology are part of a fascinating debate in social sciences that goes beyond the entire cognitive system. However, all the three are interrelated and shape the social structure. Yet the disciplines of social sciences since long have tried to identify how thoughts and ideas come into existence and how correct they are in capturing the reality of the outside world. Inquiry of relationship between language, discourse and ideology needs multidimensional perspectives. Though, dominant ideology determines the use of language, but it certainly cannot end the possibilities inherent in the language systems to produce the contradictions of dominant ideology and then subsequently replace it or change it. Ideology is overarching term, discourse is part of it. Language thus is a multidimensional aspect but partially neutral. It is because of this character that language makes discourse and ideology a possibility. In this paper, the author attempts to identify the relationship between language discourse and ideology by analyzing and comparing their denotative and connotative meanings.

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INTRODUCTION

Language, discourse and ideology are part of a fascinating debate in social sciences which tries to go beyond the entire cognitive system. It wants to identify how thoughts and ideas come into existence and how correct they are in capturing the reality of the outside world. This paper attempts to identify the relationship between language, discourse and ideology by analyzing and comparing their denotative and connotative meanings. According to the *Oxford Advanced Learner's Dictionary* language is a “system of communication in speech and writing that is used by people of a particular country or area.” Then it went on to define the word communication as “the use by humans of a system of sounds and words to communicate” (Wehmeier, McIntosh, Turnbull & Ashby, 2005, p. 862). On the other hand *Cambridge Advanced Learner's Dictionary* defines language as a “system of communication consisting of sounds, words and grammar or system of communication used by the people of particular country or profession” (Walter, Woodford & Good, 2008, p.804).

The more academic definition of language is given in *Dictionary of Media and Communication* which says, “The word language has originated from Latin word *lingua*. It means tongue and as its etymology suggests language can be defined as the use of tongue to create meaning bearing forms called words, phrases and sentences. Wherever there are humans, there is language. And all the languages serve humans in a similar way, such as naming and thus classifying the things or realities that are relevant and meaning to them” (Danesi, 2009, p. 170).

The general understanding of phenomenon of language seems to define it as neutral cognitive process in human beings. It seems human beings capture the reality to the best of their abilities and most of the times successfully represent it through the language. Scholars of semiotics or science of signs are not ready for this over simplistic take on the language.

There is a complicated debate which rests on the easier logic that sign is composed of signifier and signified. Former is physical existence of the sign and latter is material or abstract concept attached to it. But what leads to the joining of signified to the signifier in different languages, what is the relevance of it and how it affects the outcome and impact on the way and purpose language is being used by human beings, is yet to be explained satisfactorily.

Another term is discourse, which seems fairly simple and it had a pretty straight forward connotation until it was touched by French scholar Michel Foucault. Before going through the expanded meaning of the term discourse one must look at its general meaning. Here again dictionaries come to our rescue. *Oxford Advanced Learner's Dictionary* says the formal meaning of the term is 'a long and serious treatment or discussion of a subject in speech or writing.' The linguistic meaning of the term is, 'the use of language in speech and writing in order to produce meaning, language that is studied usually in order to see how the different parts of text are connected' (Wehmeier et al., 2005, p. 434).

The *Cambridge Advanced Learner's Dictionary* simply says 'discourse is communication in speech or writing. Its second meaning is the speech or piece of writing about particular, usually serious subject (Walter et al., 2008, p. 400). Dictionary meanings do not provide anything substantial to begin the academic inquiry to identify the true dimensions of the term discourse and its relationship with ideology and language, if there exists any at all. The *Dictionary of Media and Communication* defines discourse as the use of language in communication or serious discussion about a subject or particular style of talking and writing (as in the discourse of science). This term is first used by Michel Foucault to describe how language is used by people and institutions to shape social reality. In this sense, discourse is seen as a form of power because it articulates and

ensconces through language the ideas that are accepted as truth. The term is now extended to include non-verbal and other kinds of languages (visual discourse, narrative discourse and other discourses) (Danesi, 2009, p. 98). Now this definition and use of the words and phrases like power and shaping social reality gives enough ammunition for academicians to launch an inquiry into the nature of discourse and its purposes and functions.

But the field is open enough to claim neutrality as it is open to arguments and counter arguments to all the varying thoughts. But the initial definition or meaning or concept attached with the term language and discourse can be used to deduce to the statement that language is a predecessor of discourse. Discourse cannot exist without language. To plant certain world view among the people, discourse is used and it includes art of logic.

To proceed further into the enquiry it is will be necessary to know the meaning and functioning of ideology. The most elementary definition of ideology is a well-known phrase from Marx's Capital "They do not know it. But they are doing it" (Zizek, n.d). These words almost perfectly define ideology.

Oxford Advanced Learner's Dictionary says "ideology is a theory or a set of belief or principles, especially one on which a political system or party or organization is based" (Wehmeier et al., 2005, p. 770). *Cambridge Advanced Learner's Dictionary* also describes the term on similar lines "a set of ideas that an economic or political system is based on or set of belief, especially one held by a particular group that influences the way people behave" (Walter et al., 2008, p. 713). The meaning as given in the latter dictionary is wider and tells the reader that it actually affects or determines the behavioral pattern of people under its influence. Subjects of ideology do not even recognize that they are under the influence of ideology and that is its greatest strength.

Dictionary meaning of the term reflects only the general usage of the

term. As per the *Dictionary of Media and Communication* “ideology is a system of thought based on a specific set of assumptions, beliefs or viewpoints that appears to be a product of common sense, but which are actually socially constructed. Those strongly committed to particular ideology have difficulty understanding and communicating with supporters of the conflicting ideology. For Karl Marx, ideology referred to the ideas and values of a ruling class, which are reproduced by the dominant social institution (the law, family, religion, education).” (Danesi, 2009, p. 153) However, the term ideology was first used by the French writer Destutt de Tracy in his writings on enlightenment. He defined it as a study of forming ideas and as a science of ideas (Gaubu, 2003, p. 17). However, it is no more a study of forming of ideas. In the contemporary literature the term ideology is applied to the set of ideas which are adopted by a group in order to motivate it for the achievements of pre-determined goals (Gaubu, 2003, p. 16).

In the meantime, ideology as it was constructed by thinkers over the years including Marx, engulfed the language and discourse into itself. In the realm of political theory the term ideology is applied in two contexts. One is set of ideas which are expected to be true by a particular group, party or nation without further examination. These ideas are invoked in order to justify or denounce a particular way of social, economic or political organisation. In this sense, ideology is a matter of faith and has no scientific basis (Gaubu, 2003). This definition can be applied to the Indian context where neo-liberal discourse or ideology has swept away the entire political and mainly alternative ideological discourse under the carpet due to the ever increasing power and influence of corporate world. It is manifested in the representation of the Maoist movement in the mainstream media. Maoist rebels are being demonised as cruel and their objectives are being derogatorily defined in the mainstream discourse.

Arundhati Roy in one of her articles points out that some positions appear by default just correct (Roy, 2012). This happens because a particular ideology is prevalent and particular kind of discourse is ingrained into the brains of masses without telling them about the available alternatives. It is like not telling slaves that something like freedom exists and there are other ways to live also.

Slavoj Zizek extends this argument and explains it in one of his lectures in his unique style, “Now we are being told that it is only a matter of time before man will reach Mars. It was also being told that we are not far away from making Rockets which will enable human beings as a race to explore far corners of space. It is also being told that there is no reason that man should die at a particular age. We can extend our lives. It is like someone asking whether it is possible to provide food for everyone so that no one dies of hunger in any part of the world. When one dares to ask, ‘Is it possible to create such a system, where universal availability of education and healthcare will be ensured?’ Same set of intellectuals and geniuses generally reply, ‘Have you gone mad? How can it be possible?’” (Zizek, n.d.) The answer to the last question lies in ideology.

Ideology in the realm of political theory functions differently. It is a science of ideas which examine as to how different ideas are formed, how truth is distorted, and how we can overcome distortions to discover true knowledge. If this explanation is true then ideology is journey by independent thinkers, obviously Marxists, who could think about keeping aside inserted tenets of dominant ideology into society by launching an independent enquiry which must represent highest aspirations and interests of masses as a whole. Fiske grudgingly writes Marxists tend to regard the term as their particular property and they always relate ideology to social relations. (Fiske, 2011)

Karl Marx himself wrote that ideology is a manifestation of false consciousness (Gaub, 2003). But the strange thing is his own work is

transformed into a remarkable ideology known as Marxist Ideology or Communist ideology. V.I Lenin held that ideology is not necessarily a distortion of truth to conceal the prevailing contradictions, but it has become a neutral concept which refers to the political consciousness of different classes including proletariat.

In his 'Critique of Political Economy' Marx observed, 'The mode of production of material life conditions the general process of social, political and intellectual life. It is not the consciousness of men that determines their existence, but their social existence that determines their consciousness (Marx, n.d.).

Inquiry of relationship between language, discourse and ideology needs multidimensional perspectives. On one occasion this author used the term ideology and discourse, as if they can be used interchangeably. Sometimes the two concepts are used interchangeably and at times they are counterposed. (Hunt, 1993)

Language makes discourse and ideology a possibility. Human beings are capable of discussing something like discourse and ideology and their respective role on their lives, due to their inherent biological traits. Human beings can generate a system of signs to assign to different physical and abstract realities and then share it with each. It has been established by scholars that language is arbitrary in nature. Actually there is no relation between signs and real world. It carries meaning just because we share it. Discourse cannot escape the prison house of language (Chalaby, 1996). It could exist independent of tenets of any ideology, but very rarely. Language can claim its independent existence.

Once language is acquired, how it will be put into use, generally reflects the power structure. Saint Augustine in the 'City of God' narrates a famous story. Once Alexander's forces caught a pirate, then there was an audience between the Pirate and emperor. Emperor asks, 'How dare you molest

the seas?’ The pirate tells him, ‘I am a small man with a tiny boat, they call me pirate. You have a vast navy. You molest the world and they call you emperor’ (Chomsky, n.d.). See how the language is generally employed to serve the power of elite. It’s a perfect allegory which defines the use of language in an ideology charged world. Chomsky used this allegory in another context in his book *Pirate and the Emperor*.

Dominant ideology determines the use of language, but it certainly cannot end the possibilities inherent in the language systems to produce the contradictions of dominant ideology and then subsequently replace it or change it. Ideology is overarching term, discourse is part of it. Language is multidimensional but partially neutral. It is a perfect master and can be a perfect slave. Any set of thought can be termed as discourse. Even Marxist ideology is a result of particular social and economic discourse. The term discourse is narrower than ideology and language is raw material for creation and expansion of discourse and ideology.

NOTES -

1. Michel Foucault (1926-1984) is French philosopher who became widely known in the 1970’s for his writing on the role of history and culture in determining how people develop beliefs and how everyday practices guide people in defining their identities. In his seminal work *Madness and Civilizations* (1960) for instance, he showed how definitions and perceptions changed overtime to reflect changes in cultural worldviews. His most quoted work is *History of Sexuality* (1984). (Danesi, 2009, p.127)

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