

NATIONAL IDENTITY AND THE POWER OF WORDS USED BY MEDIA

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Abstract: In the era of globalization, the power of words is tremendous because they help us create, destroy or maintain relations.

By means of media, national identities can be built, developed, changed and even dismantled. Therefore, the dichotomy “us” vs. “them” is frequently encountered showing, on the one hand, a tight union with groups having similar purposes, beliefs, ideas and, on the other hand, an opposition with others that usually appear as weak, corrupt. National identity is an ongoing process of construction and deconstruction, which in most of the times is related to the concepts of “self” and “the other”.

Mass media changed our lives and, through careful choice of words, not only that we get information about where, when, when, how an event occurred, but also national identity can acquire broader or narrower dimensions.

Keywords: mass media, national identity, words, self, other.

Language helps us describe images, feelings, express ourselves, playing a major part in our personal lives. Only through it, we can strengthen and worship our culture. Although it is different from person to person, region-to-region, on the whole, we can say that there are common elements for the ones belonging to the same nation.

“Language is a purely human and non-instinctive method of communicating ideas, emotions and desires by means of a system of voluntarily produced symbols.” Sapir (1921:10)

It is closely connected to culture, helping us understand how people relate to all kinds of events, society/ progress changes. The system of concepts, images and ideas cannot have any impact upon human activity without language.

We should rather say that language is a reflection of the state of culture and allows its development, exerting a significant influence. Words and phrases are symbols of cultural attitudes and have the same kind of emotional appeal that is characteristic for other symbols.

It is the speakers’ and writers’ soul and its peculiarities reflect the true spirit of a nation. If we look back in history, we know that in hard times, war, famine, language connected people contributing to preserving their unity as nations. We should not forget how Latin was closely connected to the Roman culture, greatly contributing to the Roman superiority, which they were so proud of. Great orators used words to make more interesting speeches, to get the people’s attention and influence them.

Skilful use of words requires training, effort, thinking, but the outcome is all that matters because it helps for better activities and relations.

We live in the era of globalisation that influences both our identity and culture and the attempt to preserve them is getting harder and harder. The lexis that we use gives us indications about the words that we preserve and the ones that we “temporarily”/ “permanently” borrow, in order to express certain concepts. We can consider that even people born and living in the same family have different preferences, ways of reacting with the common point being their cultural heritage.

However, living in society, interacting with others, coming from a different environment, identity can be altered, preserved or improved. It is the same with our (written, spoken) code of communication i.e. words.

We live in a world where national identity not only comprises traditional values, but also a lot of symbolic resources which appear in mass-media and their influences are not linear. This does not occur in the same way everywhere in the world. Despite the great technological advances, we cannot speak of just one nation. We are different and we usually define ourselves as opposed to other categories.

In point of media texts, the lack of techniques and the insufficient language proficiency can lead to misunderstandings, altering discourse. Once the cultural barrier is broken, it is harder to rebuild it or even impossible. Why to send a wrong message to the beneficiaries, if this way people distrust us in further actions? When a person receives a material, he will perceive it based on his cultural awareness. Therefore, he can simply understand/ misunderstand it, issue opinions (agree, disagree).

The emergence of printing for the first time in the 8th century in China and Japan under the name of “xylography” cannot be overlooked for the purposes of the present paper. It was a sculptured piece of wood and its characters represented an entire page. This kind of graphical representation helped storing information for longer periods of time. Unlike oral communication, writing has a tendency towards fixed patterns. For centuries, it was forbidden to print books being considered by many as sins. When newspapers appeared in the 17th century, they brought along a lot of anxiety, being considered harmful. Some people were afraid they will bring to light things which should be kept secret or others thought they were trivial.

Leaving apart the skepticism that accompanied them, which after all is a common characteristic for any new product on the market, they greatly contributed to shaping public opinion. All of us know that there have been clandestine newspapers trying to spread ideologies, facing hardships from authorities. By means of the information which is displayed, the oppressed groups of people can find useful resources to oppose hegemonic strategies and define themselves.

According to Antonio Gramsci (1971), when we discuss about hegemony, the dominant class tries to impose upon the others, influencing life, principles unconsciously, by means of its institutions.

Moreover, hegemony is “framing [of] all competing definitions of reality within [the dominant class’s] range, bringing all alternatives within their horizons of thought. [The dominant class] sets the limits -mental and structural- within which subordinate classes ‘live’ and make sense of their subordination in such a way as to sustain the dominance of those ruling over them.” Hall (1977: 333)

Hegemony involves an ongoing process of reassuring the power relations because not only do they need to be gained, but also to be preserved. Living in the era of rapid transformations, the power relations are constantly changing which make the hegemony more difficult to be maintained.

Mass media crosses the boundaries of race, culture, gender when it spreads information, promoting or excluding ideas contributing to creating common opinions. On the

other hand, it does not affect individuals directly, but their culture or level of knowledge. TV, radio, newspapers had moments of glory and some of them still have. The percentage of people reading books has decreased and campaigns have taken place in our country selling newspapers with books trying to make people read as much as before.

The notion of culture comprises a set of spiritual, moral, artistic values and beliefs belonging to a society. It defines national identity and it contributes to a person's freedom (of choice, of thought).

“A national culture is a discourse, a way to construct meanings which influence and organize both our actions and our perceptions of ourselves. National cultures construct identities by creating meanings of ‘the nation’, with which we can identify; these are contained in stories that are told about the nation, in memories which link its present to its past and in the perceptions of it that are constructed.” Hall (1993: 292, 293)

A world without culture is doomed to disappear. In the era of globalisation, culture helps us maintain our identity, our language. Written communication is a key element of culture. They cannot be regarded separately. Unfortunately, the material side of life influences both of them. We communicate to inform others as well as for making a living. Communication should be more than that. It should be something that feeds our souls in the eagerness for information. Media products are both parts of daily life and key elements of culture.

We are no longer in the century when paperboys run on the street and shout the headlines of newspapers or magazines. We get a lot of knowledge from online sources because we need it in order to take decisions and issue opinions. In today's world, it is common for people, along with their daily coffee to read news, watch TV, thus getting important information, which can help them in their activities.

One of the effects of globalization is that it enables, due to the technological advances, to share information and knowledge. By means of the media, we find out what happens both nationally and internationally and we tend to define or frame our national identity. The way in which a society refers to another one can be influenced by the already existing representations of “the other”.

“Representations sometimes call out identities into question. We struggle over them because they matter- and these are contests from which serious consequences can flow. They define what is ‘normal’, who belongs-and therefore, who is excluded.” Hall (1997: 10)

By means of representations, we can refer and understand ourselves and “the others”. People have the tendency to make associations between difference and sameness, between individuals, things, concepts and they do that from very early ages, categorizing light to dark, black to white. This tendency is done by mental representations and through choice of words i.e. the language used.

Some ideological patterns are presented and amplified by the media because they can gain importance due to the increased social impact. Thus, certain symbols, persons, ideas get the people's attention, overemphasizing the role of some categories and diminishing others.

If we consider the discursive theory, the way we think, write, talk about a subject reflects the way we are (Foucault, 1972, Hall, 1997) and it also links to the power relations between “us” and “them”.

According to Fairclough (1992: 64), discourse contributes to the construction of “what are variously referred to as ‘social identities’ and ‘subject positions’ for social ‘subjects and types of self’”; it can “help construct social relationships between people” and “it contributes to the construction of systems of knowledge and belief”.

The analysis of the language use cannot be separated from its functions in human life. Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) analyses any kind of semiotic material and it opens the path for enabling an interdisciplinary dialogue between linguistics, semiotics and disciplines focused on theorizing social changes.

“CDA sees discourse- language use in speech and writing- as a form of ‘social practice’. Describing discourse as social practice implies a dialectical relationship between a discursive event and the situation(s), institutions and social structure(s) which frame it. A dialectical relationship is a two-way relationship: the discursive event is shaped by situations, institutions and social structures, but it also shapes them.” (Fairclough and Wodak, 1997:55).

Thus, discourse contributes to the social practice and it is also created by it. It can help in building, developing, changing and dismantling national identities. However, when analyzing texts, we should consider them within the historical context, because they are not just imbedded in one culture or ideology. For proper text interpretation and correct understanding of the power relations, we should consider the linguistic character of social and cultural processes.

“Language is the medium of consciousness for a reality, its forms of consciousness externalized. Linguistics, then, is an exceptionally subtle instrument for the analysis of consciousness and its ideological bases, the true shapes of invisible and bodiless thought. It is, therefore, a branch of psychology for which social fact is primary. Without immediate and direct relations to the social context, the forms and functions of language are not fully explicable.” (Kress and Hodge, 1993: 14)

By means of the personal deixis, we can categorize people; we can understand the relationships between them. Careful choice of the right pronoun should be considered because it reflects social status of an individual or groups of people in relation to “others”. The uses of the personal pronouns in the media can function as tools for persuasion purposes.

“(…) People create categories in order to understand both the physical universe outside themselves and the meaning of being human, belonging to a group (…)

The making of categories is a creative and synthesizing act that allows us to give meaning to our world and definition to the things within it- but is always, to some degree, arbitrary and culturally grounded.” Lakoff (1990: 179)

Categorizing helps in shaping attitudes and it influences the behavior. The dichotomy “us” vs. “them” shows, on the one hand, a tight union, with groups having the same purposes, causes and, on the other hand, the opposition to other concepts, ideas and beliefs.

“The other” appears as corrupt, weak, whereas the image of the “self” is built on what it is not, as opposed to the former category. Self-knowledge is accomplished based on deconstruction of “the other”, representing its alter ego. No category is complete because inside each of them there are cultural, linguistic and religious differences.

“Since every search for identity includes differentiating oneself from what one is not, identity politics is always and necessarily a politics of the creation of difference (…)

What is

shocking about these developments is not the inevitable dialectic of identity/ difference that they display but rather the atavistic belief that identities can be maintained and secured only by eliminating difference and otherness.” Seyla Benhabib (1996: 3,4)

Not always do the media provide an objective view because there are certain stereotypes as referred to “the other”. On the one side, there is a group worth of appreciation, developed, superior as opposed to another one from a lower level, sometimes even primitive. This kind of approach leads to denying or humiliating “the other”, carrying pejorative connotations.

Understanding “the self” by comparing it to “the other” requires a process of interpretation which is always coupled with aspects from history that left significant traces. Alterity is thus constructed through asymmetrical pairs, usually emphasizing the superiority of “the self”, which is depicted as flexible, adjustable. According to Giddens (1991: 33), “the altered self has to be explored and constructed as part of a reflexive process of connecting personal and social change.”

Therefore, national identity is continuously transformed due to the fluctuating realities and contexts, even power relations having both an ongoing and a dynamic character.

Actions are usually taken based on opinions about “the other”, finding legitimate or illegitimate, approved or rejected justifications. Alliances are made based on these similarities or differences establishing the limits as to whom to include as a member and whom to leave out as “the other”.

“Moreover, given the nature of political polarization in the political process, we may further expect the typical positive evaluation of US and OUR actions in positive terms and of THEM and THEIR actions in negative terms.” (Van Dijk, 1997: 28)

Media spreads information which comes most of the times in agreement with the ideologies of the dominant class. For instance, before the demonstrations which were grouped under the term “Arab Spring” and that took place in Syria, Libya, Egypt, Tunisia, the oppressive regimes had, to some extent, control on what was broadcast on TV or published in newspapers and also restricted the people’s access to information. If we think how the Arab Spring began, we can conclude that the domination of the political regimes did not last much, because, by means of social networks, people managed to gather themselves, protest and contribute to changing political leaders.

During the demonstrations people died, sacrificed their lives, believing their identities would be protected. Their reasons for doing so were connected to the social circumstances and to the material inequities.

A dictum like “we are who we are” cannot be fully understood without some references to the societies that people live in, as well as connections to the others not living within the same social context. The power relations between “us” and “them” can change when we speak about the actors involved. In crisis situations, each category considers itself better than the other and tries to gain control.

Sometimes leaders decide to mention the word “identity” in their speeches trying to get closer to the people and give them the feeling that there are not two opposite sides and that all the people are equally important for preserving the best interests of the country.

In January, 2014, President Omar al-Bashir announced in a speech a plan for reform “to stop the war and bring peace, free political society, fight against poverty and revitalize national identity.”¹

In February 2011, President Nicholas Sarkozy declared: “The truth is that in all our democracies we have been too preoccupied with the identity of those who arrived and not enough with the identity of the country that welcomed them.”²

Language helps in expressing “the self” as well as building and maintaining a relation with “the other”. By means of person deixis, alliances can be made and ideologies can be expressed. This is also frequent in political speeches because leaders try to show their determination and involvement, enabling the readers/ viewers to relate to them in an easier manner.

Sameness can be seen in the use of “we” and “our” pronouns, making visible the relation of inclusion, as opposed to “them” which shows exclusion from the former category.

On 14 January 2011, Zine el-Abidine Ben Ali spoke for the last time as president of Tunisia and chose to address to the people using the Tunisian dialect. That was the only time that he did that, maybe in an attempt to prove that there were not two distinct categories: political leaders and demonstrators.

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. Careful choice of the words in media is more than obvious. People delivering speeches, writers, translators can exploit language to influence, convince, helping the ones using it to achieve specific objectives.

The words used in the media contribute to shaping the public opinion. They change 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. But, to what extent is the vocabulary used in speeches or statements important?

Media changed our life, the way we think, react or get information. Every day in the world happen a lot of things, but the percentage of what is displayed is hard to be established. Still, most of us know that, when we turn on the TV, the news will definitely include topics such as: wars, conflicts, bombings, and attacks. Communicators of one language are not interested just on using words, but also how, when, where to do that. The art of communication is a sine qua non prerequisite of success. Words apart from their basic meaning carry additional information both related to the sender as well as to the receiver. The information that surrounds us is a clear indicator of our identity. Once we are aware of the power of words, we can learn to distinguish and to analyze better, helping us to keep the good (useful) parts and leave out the insignificant ones.

Every day we utter a lot of words to communicate or to express our thoughts, enabling ourselves to be artists, to build or destroy. We acquired them from our parents and teachers. They are part of our cultural heritage. Our role is to use them properly and pass them, in our

¹ [www.sudantribune.com](http://www.sudantribune.com/spip.php?iframe&page=imprimable&id_article=50633). 2014. Accessed on 26 April 2014. http://www.sudantribune.com/spip.php?iframe&page=imprimable&id_article=50633)

² www.ft.com. 2011. Accessed on 26 April 2014. <http://www.ft.com/intl/cms/s/0/05baf22e-356c-11e0-aa6c-00144feabdc0.html>

turn, to the next generations. They can change an entire world by their magical powers. It is not enough just to look at words from the outside because, most of the times, what matters is behind them.

It is more difficult to build what words had destroyed. Sometimes prolonged negotiations, proposals, strategies are needed to re-establish agreement which was once good, but it was ruined because of a word. Moreover, we cannot be fully assured that their outcome will be a positive one for the two actors. Opinions about “the self” and “the other” are hard to be maintained because there is a multitude of situations, predictable or not that can change the power relations very quickly.

“It was evident to everybody except the blind and the ignorant that the West was superior to the East, white to black, civilized to crude, cultured to uneducated, sane to insane, healthy to sick, man to woman, normal to criminal, more to less, riches to austerity, high productivity to low productivity, high culture to low culture. All these ‘evidences’ are now gone. Not a single one remains unchallenged.” Bauman (1993: 135-136)

Could a world exist with just one side of things like: ying without yang, black and not white?

Identity can help us understand social practices and challenges, connecting both the personal and the social dimensions. It can acquire broader or narrower dimensions, through the choice of words because they embody the people’s feelings and ideas, crossing the boundaries of space and time. It requires a sense of unity, at least related to language, geography, history and hardly can it be considered complete because it is constantly changing.

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