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Annabelle Lukin

War and Its Ideologies

A Social-Semiotic Theory and Description

 Springer

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To David – my existential fabric.

Preface

It is forbidden to kill; therefore all murderers are punished unless they kill in large numbers and to the sound of trumpets.

Voltaire

The language we use about war is inappropriate, and its inappropriateness is designed to conceal a reality so odious that we do not wish to know it.

Aldous Huxley

When the USA, Britain and Australia invaded Iraq in 2003, I was preparing my PhD graduation speech. After three and a half years as a PhD student in linguistics, I heard the belligerence of elected officials in America, Britain and my own country, Australia – the “Coalition of the Willing” – through ears fundamentally changed by reading linguistics. In a discipline much misunderstood, and fiercely fractured, my corner of linguistics is focussed on the study of meaning in society and culture. The scholars I read through my PhD – some of them dead decades ago, although one of them, then in his late 70s, marched with me against the invasion of Iraq in downtown Sydney (as he had against the Korean War in the 1950s) – were striving to give language its rightful place in our understanding of what it means to be human. For these scholars, language is part and parcel of the human condition, the product of humans being and living together over many thousands of years. Language, as the British linguist J.R. Firth observed, is the nervous system of society.

Now language was being used, again, to defend the extreme acts of violence which are an integral part of war. It was being recruited, as it had been so many times over its history, to legitimate this violence: to construe it as an act of last resort, as a necessary means to a better future, as rationally planned and managed, as legal, as – astonishingly – the only means for achieving peace. And language was ready and able, if not willing. Language, Ruqaiya Hasan argues, is not wilful: it can serve all and any ideology. Having been recruited by warmongers so many times before, language has a long history as an unwitting accomplice to those defending and rationalising their use of violence. Once again, language was ready with its words and structures, with its meanings and its crucial nuances, to work its magic for those directing the 2003 invasion of Iraq and profiting from it. As I watched the

war on nightly news, the need to understand this magical power of language and its role in normalising this most extreme form of concerted human action became more insistent. Its role, I now realised, was both absolutely essential and largely covert. Language had the power to make the deadly violence of the world's great superpower – in principle now much more visible than ever before to a distant audience – appear necessary, reasoned, strategic and heroic.

For some time, ideology has been a topic of interest in linguistics, including in its role in the prosecution of war. Chilton and others wrote on the nuclear arms debate in the mid-1980s, while Chomsky, with Herman, in the best-selling book *Manufacturing Consent* (1988), considered the discourse associated with the Indochina Wars (Vietnam, Laos, Cambodia), though notably without using a single concept or tool from linguistics. Another prominent American linguist, George Lakoff, wrote a public essay at the time of the First Gulf War, recruiting his conceptual metaphor theory to explaining “the metaphor system” being used to justify the war. And scholars within the critical linguistics tradition, and later critical discourse analysis, have since the 1970s drawn on various linguistic paradigms to study the language of the powerful. Much of this work has focussed on the partial analysis of ideological patterns in particular texts, while explicitly eschewing theoretical questions about the relationship of language and ideology. Alternatively, it avoided any linguistic theory (in Chomsky's case) or applied one particular theory (e.g. conceptual metaphor theory in Lakoff's case, or pragmatics in the case of a more recent study by Verschueren) without explaining why one particular theory should be chosen rather than another.

I wanted to understand why language was so central to ideology. Here were two interrelated, but distinct, phenomena. What was the nature of their relation? Was language always, or only sometimes, ideological? Were there features of language that could help explain the power of ideology? If language was always part of legitimating war, could linguistics help us understand how humans live with contradictory views about violence? What could language tell us about the nature of ideology, and what could ideology show us about the power of language? Could the problem of ideology be a test case for the efficacy and value of linguistics as a discipline? These were my questions about language, linguistics and ideology, provoked by living through yet another war which my government was busy helping prosecute and legitimate.

This book was written trying to answer these questions. Language *is* always ideological, as the Russian linguist, Vološinov, argued back in the 1920s. This fact of language means linguistic theories are also ideologies: they are ideologies about how to look at language. They vary in what they take language to be, and so, by extension, they vary in how they conceptualise the relationship between language and ideology. Some linguistic ideas are better suited than others to explain the power of language. Paradoxically, despite his long-time interest in power and American imperialism, Chomsky's theory of universal grammar has nothing at all to offer on the topic. Language for Chomsky is a passive substance and propaganda a “misuse” of it. The purported creative power of grammar for Chomsky excludes the power to generate ideologies. It is instead merely the power to generate syntactic

strings, strings that bear no relation to the functions language serves in the lives of its users. In the most recent articulation of his theory – a defence of recursion as the only element of an innate grammatical faculty – the problem of ideology continues to be entirely outside the remit of Chomsky’s linguistics.

I have tried in this book to find the concepts from linguistics that are useful for understanding ideology in theoretical terms as well as for the analysis of specific ideologies. Although concepts are drawn from a number of scholars, I give particular attention to the work of Michael Halliday and Ruqaiya Hasan because they recognise the intimate, bidirectional relation between language and society. Borrowing from Greimas, Halliday developed the concept of language as a “social semiotic” to explain the integration of language with other social phenomena. Language, Halliday argues, is “not something separate from humanity, but an essential part of the condition of being human”. Humans talk both to each other and to ourselves, and through these processes “we construct the microcosmos in which each one of us lives, our little universes of doing and happening, and the people and the things that are involved therein”. For Halliday, the very inner structure of language is an ideological interpretant built into language.

Halliday’s general framework of language as a social semiotic is, I argue, the linguistic theory most sensitive to the properties of language that make it ideology’s closest co-conspirator. Any theory of ideology requires a position on the relations between the world “out there” and the meanings in our minds. But the separation of “the material” from ideas, culture, or meanings is a false one. For Halliday, “all human processes, however they are manifested, whether in our consciousness, our material frames, or in the physical world around us, are the outcome of forces that are both material and semiotic at the same time”. Material and semiotic phenomena are interdependent, because “meaning needs matter to realize it”, while “matter needs meaning to organize it”. This interdependence explains why the inner structure of language is so deeply connected to human experience and why language and ideology permeate all facets of life.

A central concept in Halliday’s explanation of the evolution of language is “register”. Every instance of language use shapes and is shaped by the social context in which it operates. Though all language use is ideological, some registers, because of the status and nature of their interactants, are more open than others to ideological contestation. As Malešević argues, since power is asymmetrical, “language games” are not all equal. In this study, the primary data are news reports on the 2003 invasion of Iraq by the USA, Britain and Australia. I discuss the specific registerial features of news and the particular ideological potential of this register. Data are drawn from various media sources in the West, Asia and the Middle East, though I give particular attention to Australia’s public broadcaster, the ABC.

The data provide an empirical basis to test claims about the work of language in the legitimization of war. Real language data, however, raise both theoretical and methodological questions about how ideologies manifest. Corpus linguistics has developed a suite of techniques that allow analysts to track lexical frequencies, keywords and collocations across large data sets. Ideological reproduction requires the reiteration of linguistic patterns, and corpus linguistics enables us to reveal some of

the collective linguistic behaviours through which habits of talk and mind are formed and maintained. But the linguistic patterns generated by ideologies are not only found in lexical frequencies, keywords and collocations. To bring ideological patterning to light requires meticulous attention to the complex lexicogrammatical patterning woven in and through the text-in-context ensemble. Hasan describes ideology as “orderly variation in constellations of semantic features” and argues that ideologies produce semantic clusters, in something akin to Whorf’s concept of a “configurative rapport”. Such clusters have a nucleus, in which some semantic feature “acts as a pivot, attracting other semantic features”. Predicated on contextual presuppositions, the nucleus attracts certain lexicogrammatical, and therefore semantic, features, while keeping other kinds of patterns at a distance. In this book, I show that the lexical item *war* itself acts as a strong lexical and semantic node. This node comes with contextual presuppositions and implications which set the terms of what, semantically, will go with war and what will not. These patterns reveal how we collectively use language to legitimate war, at the same time that we are free to use language to condemn and stigmatise violence. Language is big enough to allow two distinct parallel processes: one in which war is not only legitimated but celebrated, even venerated, and another, in which violence is abhorred, denounced and punished. And like parallel lines, these two semantic processes are equidistant at all points, and never – or almost never – converge.

The book explores these parallel processes, combining corpus-based analysis of large data sets with detailed manual text analysis of whole texts. But the question of why we find these linguistic patterns, when the linguistic system is vast and open, offering its speakers infinite combinatorial options, requires the perspective of what Malinowski called the context of culture. And here linguistics must be in dialogue with other disciplines. While looking for another book in my library, I had the fortune to stumble across Siniša Malešević’s *Sociology of War and Violence*, an account of the role of collective violence and war in the shaping of much of recorded human history. “Organised violence”, Malešević argues, was decisive in the formation of modernity, such that “modernity as we know it would be unthinkable without organised violence”. Our dependence on collective violence has produced what he has called an “ontological dissonance”, a profound contradiction between our collective abhorrence of violence and our reliance on it for our modes of social organisation:

Couched in the language of justice, equality and fraternity and underpinned by a monopoly on “truth”, modern ideological narratives are adept at legitimising and squaring what initially might seem impossible: to guillotine thousands of French revolutionaries in the name of human liberty, to send millions of Soviet workers to gulags while advocating proletarian egalitarianism, to drop nuclear bombs on hundreds of thousands of Japanese civilians in the name of liberal democracy, or to kill thousands of fellow Muslims while preaching the universal brotherhood of *umma* as in contemporary Afghanistan, Pakistan or Iraq. While an individual human life is sacred in principle, no price is too high when ideological goals are at stake: killing hundreds of thousands of human beings becomes “regrettable” but acceptable when “safeguarding democracy”, “attaining or fighting communism”, “establishing our own sovereign and independent nation”, “creating an ethnically or racially pure society”, or setting up a Sharia-based, pan-Islamic caliphate.

This paradox, once visible, can be everywhere observed. It is even enshrined in international law. Chapter VII of the United Nations Charter deals with “Action with Respect to Threats to the Peace, Breaches of the Peace and Acts of Aggression”. In this chapter, Article 39 gives the Security Council the authority to determine the existence of any such threats, breaches or acts. Once the existence of such a threat, breach or act is determined, Article 40 gives the council authority to rule that the relevant parties comply with such “provisional measures” as it deems necessary. Article 41 gives authority to the council to decide on measures “not involving the use of armed force” in order to give effect to its provisions. Finally, Article 42 allows for “such action by air, sea or land forces as may be necessary to maintain or restore international peace and security”. Such action, Article 42 continues, “may include demonstrations, blockade, and other operations by air, sea, or land forces of Members of the United Nations”. Under “other operations”, member nations are entitled to deploy all the lethal technology at their disposal (other than that outlawed already, such as in the 1925 Geneva Convention). An illegal act of aggression can be remedied by legal acts of violence, according to the clauses in international law most central to such determinations. Even at the heart of international law, we find the ontological dissonance described by Malešević. Violence is “peace enforcement”.

In one and the same sentence, language obscures the gaping contradictions: “aggression” is condemned, while “other operations” are rationalised. It is linguistic technology that creates and maintains these distinct classifications – power acts through discourse to create strongly distinct orientations to phenomena that are otherwise difficult to tell apart, as described in Bernstein’s sociological account of cultural reproduction. To do this, what language creates is not simply a “piling up of lexations” (to quote Whorf): it is, instead, an “existential fabric”, a term coined by David Butt. Ideology is forceful because it is maintained, not by words here and there, but by seamless realities that are language-dependent. An “existential fabric” – Durkheim’s “collective conscience” – has a life of its own:

once constituted ... without freeing itself from the source whence it flows and whence it continues to draw its sustenance, it nevertheless becomes an autonomous factor in social life, capable of spontaneously producing its own movements without external impulsion, precisely because of the supremacy it has acquired.

There has been a problematic split in work on ideology, with much of the theoretical work avoiding empirical studies, while the empirical work has avoided theoretical problems. The outline of this book reflects my commitment both to the theoretical issues around the relations of language and ideology and to perhaps the greatest ideological problem of our time, our ongoing deference to war despite its devastating consequences. The first three chapters of the book are largely theoretical. Chapter 1 explores a sociological thesis about the interrelations of war and social organisation (drawing largely on Malešević’s account), summarises the linguistic work on ideology and sets out the dimensions of the data and methods. Chapter 2 presents some key ideas from linguistics which develop the necessary theoretical orientation to be able to see the interpenetration of language and ideology.

The relevant work of two scholars outside of linguistics is also discussed: Malinowski and Bernstein. In Chap. 3, I ask what language must be like if it is our greatest source of ideological power. On this question, it is Halliday's account of the semi-otic "big bang" – the process through which language became a multidimensional semiotic system with realisational, stratificational and metafunctional complexity as its defining features – that is central to fully understanding the ideological power of language and, by extension, the power of ideology.

Readers who prefer to deal directly with the empirical demonstration of these theoretical issues should begin at Chap. 4, which explores two key lexical nodes – *war* and *violence*. The chapter shows contrasting definitions, thesaurus locations, frequencies and collocations of these items, which make visible some of the means by which these terms are kept distinct. Chapters 5 and 6 explore two single texts, which construe events early in the 2003 invasion of Iraq from distinct points of view, the first as part of a *war* and the second as terrible acts of *violence*. Chapter 7 provides another vista on the semantics of war, by examining a corpus of news reports on the 2003 invasion of Iraq. The chapter provides a perspective between the large-scale analysis of specific lexical items in Chap. 4 and the very detailed analysis of single texts in Chaps. 5 and 6. It shows the complex inter-rank and cross-metafunctional insulation of war from its human agents and its terrible destructiveness. It is my hope that these empirical studies will make more visible the constellations of linguistic patterns on which rests the ontological dissonance which, as Malešević argues, is right at the heart of the modern age. Chapter 8 concludes the book, by asking whether the "existential fabric" we have collectively woven to make war legitimate can ever be undone.

Sydney, Australia

Annabelle Lukin

Acknowledgements

Throughout my work and study in linguistics, I have had the benefit of proximity to genuine scholars, whose intellectual journeys were never determined by climbing institutional ladders or seeking fame or influence.

My first debt is to Michael Halliday, who bequeathed to linguistics a portrait of language both panoptic and finely textured. As he “wandered the highways and byways of language”, Halliday sought to understand, simply, how language works. His interest was always in “what other people wanted to know about language, whether scholars in other fields or those with practical problems to be faced and solved”. Halliday’s profound insights into the problem of ideology have been passed over by many scholars who thought there was some shorter route to making sense of the power of language. I hope I have been able to do his ideas some justice in this monograph.

Ruqaiya Hasan understood more than any other linguist the demands that the problem of ideology put on the discipline of linguistics. Rather than simply trying to use linguistics to analyse particular examples of ideologies, she wanted to understand what ideology shows us about the nature of language and what the organisation of language tells us about the nature of ideology. Just weeks before she received her terminal diagnosis, she had agreed to work with me on this book. I think she might have liked it: she certainly would have seen even more flaws in it than are obvious to its mother.

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The invitation from Professor Alex Peng to deliver the inaugural Halliday-Hasan Lecture Series at Guangdong University of Foreign Studies in December 2015 gave me the opportunity to present and test out many of the theoretical ideas that are now in this book. My trip was funded by the Halliday-Hasan International Fund for the Study of Language and Other Systems of Meaning.

It has been a privilege to discover and absorb the work of Siniša Malešević, Professor of Sociology at University College, Dublin. Professor Malešević's account of the nexus between war, ideology and social organisation enabled me see a coherence across a variety of linguistic patterns which were emerging from my analysis. I greatly appreciate him making time to comment on drafts of Chaps. 1 and 4.

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Thanks to my nephew Oscar for helping me work out the title for the book.

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