**Language of war and peace**

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Austrian linguistic philosopher Wittgenstein says, “The meaning of a word is its use in the language.” This implies that words do not have intrinsic meanings in language themselves, and they derive their meaning from the contexts.

This question is related to communication. According to English educator and literary critic IA Richard, communication occurs when one mind acts on its environment in such a way that it influences another mind and creates an experience in that second mind that is similar to the experience of the first mind.

A language is not just a collection of phonetics, phonology, words, syntax and grammar. It is not only influenced by its environment and political and cultural conditions but is also a means of describing these conditions.

Language is not an inanimate thing to be studied as an inanimate object. It is a process which is not only related to every field of human life but also influences it and itself takes influence from the cultural, social and political contexts. The change or death of languages is proof of their being living entities.

Language shapes perception and behaviour. Language can be used to reduce differences, incite violence, or seek recognition of diversity. The language of war usually serves to mask the reality of violence.

Like the state of peace, the language of peace can be negative or positive. Negative peace does not refer to the complete absence of war or violence but an interval of peace between wars, whereas positive peace is a permanent state of non-violence and war. The language of positive peace promotes an open and inclusive discourse that affirms and recognizes diversity.

Knowledge is power, and so is language. Those who control the language of war and peace are the ones who can sway society to either peace or war.

From the earliest wars between ancient societies to the world wars of the 20th century and the ‘war on terror’ in the 21st century, political and military leaders have fuelled wars by inducing discourses of wars into the language through various terms. It is the use of language that moralizes and legitimizes wars.

Modern nation-states have made wars indispensable to national sovereignty. Unfortunately, the major languages of the world have more terms for war than for peace, and develop more discourse about war than peace. The most widespread justification for war arose during the Middle Ages and continues to this day. It was prompted by many thinkers such as St Augustine and St Thomas Aquinas. Wars were euphemized as holy war, just war or jihad by language itself.

The language of war always conjures up terms that are used to kill, oppress and torture others, rob others of their resources, deprive others of their beliefs and languages, and dominate them.

By using language in this way, such actions seem normal to people. For example, war itself is justified by terming it defence. Political opponents are called the ‘axis of evil’. Similarly, a sheer attack on another nation is described as a ‘pre-emptive strike’ and the deaths of civilians are termed as ‘collateral damage’. Such language terms create positive perceptions of negative acts and negative images of positive ones that affect our perceptions and behaviour.

In linguistics, such use of terms is called ‘lexicalization’. In critical theory this is called ‘special pleading’ and it is used by the dominant class specifically to maintain their power. For example, the massacre of children and civilians is considered a sacrifice for the country or the deaths caused by dropping a bomb on a seminary as collateral damage.

People form a worldview through the language they are taught. In the process of socialization, language adapts people to the values of society. Therefore, this process of socialization uses language to achieve specific goals. For example, during the cold war, Americans viewed their government as a ‘champion of freedom’ and the Soviet government as ‘an evil empire’.

For American linguist Norman Fairclough, language is a form of social behaviour in which we rely on common sense or ideological assumptions. According to him, a dominant discourse suppresses other discourses and as a result, people forget its totalitarianism or brutality and then that discourse/narrative seems normal.

Fairclough calls this ‘the naturalization of discourse’. For example, the first violence by the state on people shocks us, but because of this powerful discourse, this violence continues, and it seems normal to us. Somebody is made a villain in a faraway country and redemption is made against this demon. Take the example of Saddam Hussein or those who were equal to their forefathers in bravery during the war against the Soviet Union, but later became terrorists by the use of this discourse.

The language of power creates propaganda through state media, controlled media, or education. In our curriculum, our historical heroes are still villains while the invaders are made heroes.

This relation between language and power was pointed out in the late 19th century by Friedrich Nietzsche. He says that our value judgment is mainly influenced by the use of language. Those who control language also control our point of view as well as our reactions. Many thinkers such as Wittgenstein, Michel Foucault, Gramsci, and Bourdieu have also pointed out the interplay between language and power.

Language cannot be separated from the distribution of power in a society, and the distribution of power is not equal. According to French sociologist Pierre Bourdieu, the use of language depends on the social status of a person and this status is outside of language. Outside here refers to the social conditions within which this discourse flourishes through language.

He further educates us that the construction of a linguistic national unit is a political hegemony where one language is imposed on others and then this discourse of power is carried further through it. For instance, Urdu in Pakistan or national language or languages in nation-states.

Through this discourse within language, the ‘authority, in Gramsci’s words ‘hegemon’ can justify their behaviour.

The language of peace is an effective factor in achieving peace and justice. The language of peace is a symbol of linguistic non-violence. It is inclusive and collaborative. Yet to the extent that the language of war dominates official discourse, the language of peace often becomes subservient to it; and thus becomes a language of negative peace.

The language of negative peace actually perpetuates injustice. A government and its media may temporarily stop labelling a particular nation as an ‘enemy’ or ‘devil’, but the private attitudes it fosters or the prejudice it creates are often hidden. When biases are hidden, it becomes even more difficult to detect and eliminate them from people.

The language of positive peace facilitates the complete negation of violence even in times of continuation of wars. Establishing a language of positive peace requires a change in cultures based on war and violence because language derives its meaning from culture. It is important to acknowledge and truly appreciate the existence of diversity of all kinds.

The effort to establish a positive peace language requires the promotion and development of each indigenous language and its empowerment so that alternative languages can flourish against a national or war language and a narrative of peace against war and violence could be developed.

Several activities promote the achievement of respect, cooperation and understanding needed for positive peace. Such activities negate the discourse of terms expressing prejudices based on race, colour, gender and sexual orientation. Different languages, races, genders and cultures are the tunes that create the song of humanity.

When a language is suppressed by power, the act creates linguistic alienation on the one hand and linguistic violence on the other. In 1948, it was said that the national language of Pakistan would be only Urdu and those who opposed it were enemies of the country.

Thus, on the one hand, Bengalis were subjected to linguistic violence, while on the other this caused alienation from Urdu. The hegemonic narrative in Urdu, which is driven by the curriculum, media and books, alienates the other linguistic units of the country from Urdu.

To avoid linguistic violence and war discourse, it is necessary to promote more than one language in society. Countries that are monolingual should teach and promote second and third languages, and countries that are already multilingual should promote this linguistic diversity. Thus, war discourse in an official or national language can be countered by presenting alternative discourses in other languages.

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