

# Language, technology, war, peace

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I would like to propose a brief analysis of the role of some of the features of human language and (its) technologies in building the discourses of war and peace. I'm particularly interested in exploring the technologies of language, but I would also like to consider some of the characteristics that I think are common to all technologies.

The first question that I would like to address is what language is. Michael Halliday once said that "language is as it is because of what it does". From a biophysical perspective, language is a set of sensory stimuli that translate into signifiers that express signifieds and form the signs that make sense of our lives as human beings. They create the meanings by which we live. As Humberto Maturana put it, "we human beings exist and operate as human beings as we operate in language: languaging is our manner of living as human beings".

Thus, from a biocultural evolutionary perspective, language has been and is both a cognitive and a communicative tool for the phylogenesis of the species *Homo sapiens* and the ontogenesis of each one of its members. This necessarily implies, as Edward Said put it, that language is "both the constricting horizon and the energising atmosphere within and by which all human activity must be understood". Language is at one and the same time both the facilitator of cognitive structures and the bottleneck that constrains mental representations within the diverse modes of input-output that are typical of all manifestations of human language. The frames of reference of single language systems profoundly condition our mental activity, influencing, for example, the construction of our idea of agency relationships and the way in which we reason about them and employ them in our action.

My next question concerns what technology is. Technology essentially evolved as a survival strategy involving inventing a range of means of production and reproduction of material and immaterial artefacts. Technology is based on automation and repetition. What happens becomes habitual and leads to assuefaction, or taking something for granted or considering it inevitable. Technology becomes both an extension of and a shaper of our minds. The goals of technology have gradually been transformed from surviving and working to exerting power and maximising efficiency.

In this respect, the point I want to make is that technology brings about a loss of presence and true engagement. It creates distance and consequent alienation or indifference. It forms what in industrial terms is called outsourcing. There is a reification of relationships leading to

a weakening of individual and collective consciousness and undermining awareness of what is really happening. Whether, for example, we refer to “weapons of mass destruction” as material artefacts or we use the immaterial artefact of abstract language to describe them in this way, the outcome is the same.

What then are the technologies of language? The technologies of human language are always related to its biophysical basis and its principal channels: the phonic, based on sound waves, and the graphic, based on light waves. Oral language is immediate and personal. It happens in real time in a given place and is produced by specific interlocutors who relate to each other. In this sense, it is unique, and it is valid for the reality of that situation.

Written language, on the other hand, is often distant and impersonal. It is usually displaced in time and location and is often produced for a variety of situations and people. In the transition from speech to writing language transforms himself from something that happens into something that exists, the event becomes a phenomenon, no longer a process but rather a product. Even the recent digitalization of these two technologies of language does not essentially change these fundamental characteristics.

This development of two complementary and alternative ways of representing reality - as a process and as a product - is reflected in the emergence of a second level of technology: that of the choice between verbal language and nominal language. Verbal language evolved as a set of words related to actions and events with the essential character of something happening and therefore the world as process.

Nominal language came into being as a set of words directly referring to tangible things such as objects and tools followed by the tendency toward the reification of phenomena, concepts and ideas. To the concrete noun is added the abstract noun through nominalization, a key characteristic of a dominant worldview based on “scientific” or “objective” knowledge.

Nominalization creates a synoptic view of the reality represented, encompassing and synthesizing inside single words with a high level of lexical density a kind of meaning very different from that conveyed through verbalization. While the verb describes what happens as process, something subjective and grounded in agency, the noun describes the only the product, wholeness, permanence, fact, objective knowledge without necessarily any reference to agency. People who are injured or killed become “victims” or even “collateral damage”. This facilitates the phenomenon of otherization whereby individuals or groups are perceived or portrayed as different or alien, less important or expendable, at the very least less worthy

of consideration when deciding on or evaluating the outcome of actions.

These then are the corollaries and direct consequences of the technologies of language, most specifically when combining writing and nominalization as in so many forms of current human discourse. To analyse this in a wide range of contexts and discourses would require much more time than that available, but it is so pervasive as to even characterize the following extract from the website of Médecins Sans Frontières, an organization that can hardly be accused of being in favour of waging war.

War is a phenomenon of organized collective violence that affects either the relations between two or more societies or the power relations within a society. War is governed by the law of armed conflict, also called “international humanitarian law”.

What emerges above all else is a vision based on repeated abstractions such as “war”, “phenomenon”, “collective violence”, “power relations”, “armed conflict”, and “humanitarian law”. Phenomena are represented as being apparently objective or definitive, rather than as contingent events that depend on circumstances and agencies, while human beings as agents in the world are completely absent. The phenomena themselves are the abstract agents held responsible for the (invisible) consequences suffered by human beings, rather than the results of the agency of human beings themselves. Nominal language constantly de-personalizes events, de-democratizes processes, de-responsibilizes perpetrators and consequently disempowers victims and activists.

Every time we use such abstractions, we eliminate people, their actions and the consequences of these actions, at the level of those who act to cause or exacerbate what happens, those who suffer and try to survive in such conditions, those who perhaps would or could act to do something to change something. It is indeed absolutely paradoxical that the spread of nominal language, so intimately correlated with the growth of objective knowledge and the idea of scientific “progress”, constantly risks causing us to lose sight of the very humanity that developed human language and can easily find itself in danger of being cancelled by that same language.

As Jack Spicer put it, “where we are is in a sentence”, in the sense both of being imprisoned within the confines of our lexicogrammatical resources and condemned, for example, to perpetuate the idea of the inevitability of war by a tribunal composed of ourselves as members of our own species who share a dominant worldview.

If languaging is our way of being and we want to change our current way of being at war with ourselves, then we need to ask ourselves how we can change our current way of languaging. My belief is that we must necessarily embark on a journey involving transforming our discourses from abstraction to concretion, from nominalization to verbalization, from product to process, from impersonal agency to personal agency. This will be no easy enterprise. It will involve creating a language space for peace. As T.S. Eliot put it,

For last year's words belong to last year's language  
And next year's words await another voice.

Most fundamentally, they will be words with a *voice*, interlocutors speaking about what is happening and what they are doing and can do as agents.