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**LANGUAGE AND SOCIAL RECONCILIATION\*****M. M. K. D. Ratnayake<sup>1</sup>****Abstract**

This paper focuses on the role language has in social reconciliation, making the point that it is perhaps the most crucial element in the process. Language can create reality, as early linguists like Saussure has shown us, often naturalizing ideology-filled cultural constructs, so that words are often misrecognized as being neutral. This paper shows how language affects the progress towards war and the possibility of violence itself. It uses the example of gender to show how a quieter, more systemic violence that can be unleashed towards a group of people through language use. The modern world uses language very effectively to get people in agreement or to mobilize them towards a goal desired by a powerful few. For this, language works not as a means for clear communication, but as something that can be used as a smokescreen to obfuscate issues, something that will be clarified in this paper by using an example from Sinhala literature. The conclusions drawn in this paper are that words and their use play a crucial role in life and in social processes and dynamics, and that it is very important that people realize this if we are to move towards any kind of long-lasting social reconciliation.

**Keywords:** *gender, ideology, language, linguistics, violence*

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## Introduction

Language is at the heart of life. Human beings differ from all other animals on earth by having a very complex system of communication among them, that has been capable of making them the most powerful species on earth. It has also made them the most dangerous and destructive. We have developed language to the point of making them capable of obfuscation and miscommunication so that they can be put in service of a powerful few to the detriment of the majority; within a framework of what is called democracy and choice, such power becomes a necessity. Who remains more powerful, who goes to war, who mobilizes groups, who makes those decisions – this is all not just about economics but naming as well. As Nobel Prize winning author Olga Tokarczuk puts it, “It’s interesting to me that contemporary wars aren’t conducted on the street or with weapons, but with words and narratives. . . . It is a question of who can tell the story better” (Tokarczuk, 2018). It is not just on military battles, however, that focus should be concentrated when we talk about language’s role in peace and equality. There is systemic violence that language can carry, something that society might not even realize for language has the ability to make things seem natural when they are actually constructed concepts, affecting categories of gender, class, as well as ethnicity – and almost everything else really.

## Methodology

This paper gives a rather broad outline of how language plays a great part on creating our reality and how we act within it, looking especially at how many rifts can be caused among social sectors aided by words and discourse, be it with regard to ethnicity, gender or class. Starting with showing how words play a role in war, it will go briefly to the roots of how language can do this, giving examples to show ideology in action through words in the field of gender specifically. It will then elaborate on how language can be a smokescreen, giving an example of such an instance depicted in Sinhala literature which has close parallels to real life. The objectives of this paper are to show what a crucial role words and language play in life, which is far removed from simple communicative function that is generally attributed to it, and to emphasize how important it is that society as a whole realizes this. Rather than an objective viewpoint removed from the events of one’s own life, a personal

element is also incorporated into this paper to reinforce the immediacy language has to life.

## **Discussion**

### **Language and war**

Never has a time been more relevant – this is March 2024 - to speak of words and war; of what barbarities, spinning narratives can keep covered; of how whole peoples can be labelled non-human and be wiped off the earth with the world watching silently; how speaking out can be labelled anti-this and that, when it is simply anti-violence or anti-cruelty. Sri Lanka is not new to this play upon discourse either; about a decade ago it finished a war between the state military and Tamil militants – again the label attached to the ending shows the politics of one’s stand on this: the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam stopping civilians from leaving the conflict zone, and the government determined to finish the conflict by military means, brought about names that used the word “humanitarian” rather profusely in the media of the South.

The link between wars and words is old; words getting into the framework of religion, for example, being a main driving force behind calls for young people to fight in wars of all kinds, world wars included, or the project of colonization, which could conceal the white man’s drive for base material profit with high sounding phrases like ‘civilizing’ or ‘saving the souls of’ the ‘savage’ natives. As Elleke Boehmer says, the British Empire, “was, at least in part, a textual exercise” (1995, 13) and that “imperialism was a thing of the mind and representation, as well as a matter of military and political power and the extraction of profit” (1995, 23). Things haven’t changed with time. No war in the modern world can be conducted without language first making it possible for violence against the other to be accepted. And that we do through words/language, narratives and storytelling.

As Judith Butler has shown in her book, *Precarious Lives*, to massacre a people, you have to dehumanize them first. Admitting that “Dehumanization’s relation to discourse is complex” (Ibid, 36), Butler says,

It would be too simple to claim that violence simply implements what is already happening in discourse such that a discourse on dehumanization produces treatment, including

torture and murder, structured by the discourse. Here the dehumanization emerges at the limits of discursive life, limits established through prohibition and foreclosure (Ibid, 36).

Using the aftermath of the 9/11 bombings in the USA to frame her argument, Butler says that the articulation of US hegemony

takes place in part through producing a consensus on what certain terms mean, how they can be used, and what lines of solidarity are implicitly drawn through this use. We reserve “acts of terror” for events such as September 11 attacks on the United States, distinguishing these acts of violence from those that might be justified through foreign policy decisions or public declarations of war. (2004, 4)

Recent ethnic wars have made us forget that the Sri Lankan army was at one time pitted against Sinhala youth in the Marxist uprising that happened in the 1980s. At the University of Sri Jayewardenepura, which was used as a detention camp at the height of the terror, I remember, very much later, seeing an inscription on the floor of a classroom I was teaching in, that had been used to keep young people locked up during the insurgency, which said in Sinhala, if I remember correctly, something like “A revolutionary is not a terrorist”. That’s a definition – that’s about language - that’s exactly what Judith Butler is referring to in a different context when she says that if she has understood the grammar correctly, it is as if the words “terrorist” and “slaughter” should be words that “within the hegemonic grammar, should be reserved for unjustified acts of violence against First World nations” (Butler, 2004, 13).

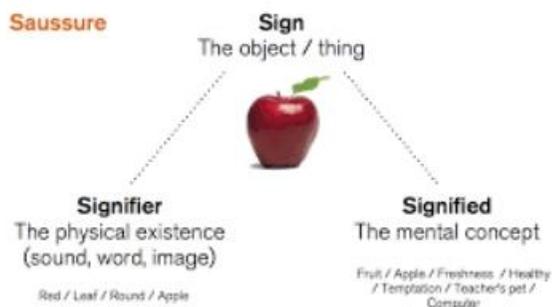
In short how we look at anything and anyone is determined by language. It is not just a medium of communication – it is how we look at the world, it can be reality itself.

### **The roots of the ‘Language is reality’ idea came from linguistics**

Perhaps one should go right back to the roots of language and deal with linguistics to show how fundamental language is to the creation of our reality – which leads us to Saussure, considered one of the fathers of modern linguistics, whose ideas made a powerful impact at the start of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century when his lectures were published posthumously as *A Course in General*

*Linguistics* in 1916. He showed that “language has no positive terms: it depends at every level on meaningful contrasts or oppositions” (Hornby 2014, 52); for instance, as the famous example shows, the 8.25 train to Geneva is not the actual train but the idea of the train which is not, for example, the 8.25 to Paris.

If this is the case, then what about the world out there? What Saussure makes clear is that there is no ready-made world into which we attach words like labels; instead, the concept of what something is has to be created before a word is attached to it. So, the word (sign) is made out of two parts: the concept of a real thing out there in the world (signified), and the letters/icons/sound that represent it (signifier), like so:



Source: <https://the1knowledge.blogspot.com/2017/05/signifier-and-signified.html>

Figure 1: Saussure's idea of the sign

It is the mental concept part of it that has strong links to the specific context or culture of the person, and therefore is strongly connected to ideology. Language, therefore, doesn't just represent reality, it *creates* it. Saussure's Structuralist ideas greatly helped Descriptivist linguists (Hornby, 2014, 55) who were mainly responsible for founding linguistics as a science (Hornby, 2014, 54). The Sapir-Whorf Hypothesis that was very well known within this way of thinking, popular from around the 1920s to the 1950s (Hornby, 2014, 54), states that “languages were not only all structurally different, but that individuals' fundamental perception of reality is moulded by the languages they speak” (Hornby, 2014, 56). How much one's culture can affect that reality is shown by Sapir saying in 1929 that the real world is to a large extent unconsciously build up on the language habits of the group. No two languages are ever sufficiently similar to be considered as representing the same social

reality. The worlds in which different societies live are distinct worlds, not merely the same world with different labels attached. (Hornby, 2014, 56)

Or as Whorf says,

We dissect nature along the lines laid down by our native language. . . . We cut nature up, organize it into concepts, and ascribe significances as we do, largely because we are parties to an agreement to organize it this way – and agreement that holds throughout our speech community and is codified in the patterns of our language. (Hornby 2014, 57)

Once we realize the role of language in our epistemology, we realize how much it can do for social reconciliation in almost every aspect there is: gender, class, as well as ethnicity/race and religion that the discussion above was concerned with.

### **Gender as an example to show the ideological bias of language**

With regard to gender, there are obvious and rather old controversies about why masculine terms (pronouns, nouns) are taken to mean the whole of humankind ('mankind' being the earlier word) and not the feminine version of the word, to do the same thing. Ideological battles had been fought before words like chairperson, and not chairman, was deemed more appropriate for the modern world. Then there are cases where the masculine word seems to have better connotations than the feminine: 'wizard' is positive, for example, as when we say "He is a wizard at fixing things", but 'witch' is negative (at least till Harry Potter came around) as in "She is a witch, loud mouthed and cruel, so people avoid her". The words 'bachelor' and 'spinster', meaning an unmarried adult, also have two different values attached them, the female being considered rather deficient in something, while the male isn't.

Thinking on these lines, perhaps the fight of people who feel they belong to neither genders conclusively, and seek for a space where they are accepted, are also struggling against language, which usually only has the categories of 'man' and 'woman', thereby rendering anything else 'unnatural'? Language naturalizes – deeming the world as being 'as is' through its categorizations -

that is its danger. Then we forget concepts are constructed in the final count. When they fight for equality, are gender-fluid people struggling because of the lack of an old word to describe them? What does it mean for some sexual relations to be “unnatural” – same sex partnerships, for example, which is still considered criminal in Sri Lanka, even though the people who brought that law here have amended their own laws to include same sex marriages as well.

Words are ideological: Take a simple word like ‘mother’, for example; what are the connotations associated with it? There are so many, Sinhala abounds with them, as do many other languages, I am sure, but there are other aspects that are relevant to a woman – a sexually desiring being for example – that just doesn’t get connotated with the term ‘mother’. Therefore, words can act as restrictors too. Religion, culture, ideology - they keep concepts in place and language helps in that process; it’s fine when it’s used for the good and equality of all, but they need to be interrogated when segments of society are repressed or treated as unequal within the frameworks that have been constructed through them.

Phrases can clearly build harmful frameworks, all the more insidious as they become part of the culture they are born in and are not often challenged, very often seeping into the field of ‘jokes’ whose power of naturalizing harmful stereotypes seems hardly to get questioned in cultures like ours. Take some Sinhala phrases and sayings, for example: women’s brains have been compared to the length of a spoon’s handle, or the ideal children one is meant to have are given as a talkative son and a pretty daughter. Terms like ‘hakara kata’ (loud and crude mouth) seem exclusively reserved for a repulsive female; the ideal Sinhala woman is quiet.

Intersectionality has taught us that categories blend and seep into each other – let’s take a look at class cutting across gender. The phrase “She talks like a ‘watti-amma’ [vegetable-selling woman] or ‘maalukari’” [fish-selling woman] carries clear connotations of class and gender used negatively: these are not ‘ladies’, ladies are up above with their genteel behavior as suitable for their economically superior class. I have yet to see a more powerful term than ‘lady’ to keep women in check, at least in the part of the world I come from! Bringing

in ethnicity to this mix, we can ask, calling a very voluble bird ‘demalichcha’ (female Tamil) in Sinhala – what could that be except racist?

### **Language to mis-communicate: to mask instead of uncover**

We had dealt with the ideology inherent in words and phrases so far, but with regard to language, there is also the politics of use: how we use the language has very significant meaning for society and the peace and equality within it. We tend to think that the purpose of language is communication and clarity, but in the modern world it is possible to say that it can actually be used for the opposite purpose: masking the true intent of actions. Why would spin-doctors and biased mass-media play such a huge role in the modern world, and rake in profits by the millions for themselves, otherwise? Look at what recent war maneuvers have been called by one of the most powerful countries in the world:

- Operation Prosperity Guardian is a United States-led military operation by a multinational coalition formed in December 2023 to respond to Houthi-led attacks on shipping in the Red Sea. (Wiki)
- Operation Enduring Freedom (OEF) was the official name used by the U.S. government for both the first stage (2001–2014) of the War in Afghanistan (2001–2021) and the larger-scale Global War on Terrorism. (Wiki)
- Operation Enduring Freedom, the "military response to the September 11, 2001 attacks on the United States", initially planned to be named as *Operation Infinite Justice*

We are sufficiently confused as to what side of any line we are standing on, with names that use words like these. Are we resisters or part of the establishment? we can ask ourselves, for words like justice, freedom and morality are being bandied about freely, each side of a conflict using it for themselves, no matter who the aggressor is, or who the victim. For, as Arundhati Roy says,

The language of dissent has been co-opted. WTO documents and World Bank resettlement policies are now written in very noble-sounding, socially just, politically democratic-sounding language. They have co-opted that language. They use language to mask their intent. But what they say they’ll do and

what they actually do are completely different. . . (Roy 2009, 96)

### **A literary example for language as masking**

An example of literature calling out this function of language – its intent to mask and persuade people to do things that they would not otherwise do - can be found in Liyanage Amarakeerthi's *Kurulu Hadawatha*, a subtle and complex novel that shows the power of words and the manipulative use they can be put to. A man who becomes a star of a radio channel by idealizing his village, soon getting adept at using trigger words that are sure to press some kind of nationalistic button in people, is used by advertisers to sell multinational products by getting him to promote these using the same words he had made popular:

The words that he had used within the Smart Agro advertising project, like, local (*deshiya*), motherland (*mawbima*), sujutha (*pure*), mother earth (*maw polowa*), the earth nourished by the blood of those heroes who died for it, purity (*pavithrathvaya*), clean village, the healthy ancient Sinhalese, began to be demanded by local companies too. “The real nationalistic (*jathikathwaye*) *papadam*”, pure (*sujatha*) local beedi, untainted (*noindul*) Sinhala rice, non-foreign biscuit, noodles from the village (*gamen gena*) mosquito coils carrying the fragrance of the local (*Deshiyathwaye*) – all these ads invariably needed Kurulugangoda's voice and image, so his new house near the Diyawanna Lake grew straight towards the sky.

(Amarakeerthi 2013, 252)

There is a purpose to all this too. The economic system requires that the world behave in particular ways, whether it be in Sri Lanka or elsewhere. That too is caught in this novel by getting the radio star's university-student friend to analyze the situation by saying. “The most dangerous thing is that your radio has become a pathway on which multinational corporations invade the villages. There are other roads. I wonder if the investors for Miyuru FM are those companies” (Amarakeerthi 2013, 284).

The fact that nationalism (and through that, often to ethnic tension in a multiethnic society) itself is tied to this process of advertising through the

clever use of language – and that words are finally put to use of the capitalist project - has been shown by the friend pointing out that “Now global capital comes with the noise of nationalism that they themselves make. Capitalism now comes with nationalists at the forefront” (Amarakeerthi, 2013, 284).

Narrative is everything: even the upholding of systems that are blatantly unfair and keep large segments of the world in poverty can maintain their power only if they have woven a story – a word-net, if you will – to suit their purpose. The sooner we understand that, the sooner we can be critical about the use of language and hopefully achieve some kind of reconciliation among the warring parts of the world and its societies.

### **Conclusion**

To end where we began, there is war in the world today – and it *is* integrally connected to language. There are people dying in their thousands in Palestine even as I type this, though Israel isn't without casualties either. The fight is decades old and is connected to dehumanizing a group, helped no doubt by the fundamentalists who erupt time to time, to hit back at systemic violence. To quote Butler and Arundhati Roy, from what they have said in 2004 and 2002 respectively, is to describe the mind-numbingly horrible reality of now. Butler's take on Islamophobia predates the current Israel-Palestine conflict by more than a decade, but her words couldn't be more current:

To what extent have Arab peoples, predominantly practitioners of Islam, fallen outside the “human” as it has been naturalized in its “Western” mold by the contemporary workings of humanism? What are the cultural contours of the human at work here? (Butler, 2004, 32)

In the eerie silence of the world that watches and doesn't seem to see what is going on now, it is possible to see what Butler means by saying that

Violence against those who are already not quite living, that is, living in the state of suspension between life and death, leaves a mark that is no mark. There will be no public act of grieving. . . . None of this takes place. In the silence of the newspaper, there was no event, no loss, and this failure of recognition is

mandated through an identification with those who identify with the perpetrators of that violence.” (Butler, 2004, 36)

Prohibition to grieve is something that the survivors of the war in Sri Lanka is not unfamiliar with too, if they belong to sides not aligned with the state.

Roy says in December 2023, prefacing it with “if I hadn’t told you it was written 21 years ago, you’d think it was about today” something she had said at the first anniversary of 9/11, when the Twin Towers fell in New York: the casting of a people as non-existent or non-human through their words, before cruelty against them can be unleashed:

In 1969, Israeli Prime Minister Golda Meir said, “Palestinians do not exist.” Her successor, Prime Minister Levi Eschol, said, “Where are Palestinians? When I came here [to Palestine], there were 250,000 non-Jews, mainly Arabs and Bedouins. It was a desert, more than underdeveloped. Nothing.” Prime Minister Menachem Begin called Palestinians “two-legged beasts.” Prime Minister Yitzhak Shamir called them “‘grasshoppers’ who could be crushed. (Roy, 2023)

She goes on to say that “This is the language of heads of state, not the words of ordinary people”. Yes, that is the level in which language needs to be used if it is to be part and parcel of the agenda rolled out that affects the whole world, the whole of humanity, in fact.

Discussion of language, we see, therefore, is not just about language. It never has been and never will be. It is language and narrative that decides “Who counts as human? Whose lives count as lives? And, finally, What *makes for a grievable life?* (Butler 2004, 20). Language, in short, decides how we look at the world. That is why language and social reconciliation has become perhaps the most crucial issue we have to think about right now. Because as Roy says

The most bewildering conundrum of our times is that all over the world people seem to be voting to disempower themselves. They do this based on the information they receive. What that information is and who controls it — that is the modern world’s poisoned chalice. (Roy, 2023)

Language is netting the whole world into one vast, no-way-out framework with modern technology also helping vastly in the process, as Roy has also pointed above. We need to think about it very seriously for the sake of all humanity. Language and social reconciliation are not just an accidental pairing. It is perhaps the most fundamental one.

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