# LANGUAGE, THE MASS MEDIA AND THREAT TO SOCIAL EQUILIBRIUM

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## ABSTRACT

*This paper investigates an advertisement. The objective is to ascertain whether the creators of the advertisement, at the time they created the advertisement, consciously guarded against other meanings than the one they had intended for the advertisement.  The procedure used was to show the advertisement to a focus group. Members of the focus group are skilled in Critical Discourse Analysis. The creators of the advertisement said that the meaning found in the advertisement by the focus group was contrary to the meaning the creators had intended for the advertisement. In this light, it was recommended that continuous analysis of texts be encouraged in order to identify potential unintended distortive discursive practices that lurk in texts.*

**Keywords:** Language, mass media, social equilibrium

## INTRODUCTION

Language has been described as having a causal effect (Fairclough, 2003). By causal effect is meant the potential to bring about social change and development (Fairclough, 2006; Gouldner, 1976). Language has enormous powers. Such powers are rated as capable of starting wars, starting changes in education, in industrial relations, in architectural designs and so forth (Fairclough, 2003).  Scolon (2006) is of the opinion that social problems in our contemporary world are inextricably linked to Language. Citing Basil Bernstein, Bonvillain (1993, p. 166) contends that language does not only structure human thought pattern but, importantly, accounts for the divergent ways individuals make sense of their experience. The importance of language was not lost on Heidegger. As cited in Littlejohn, (1996, pp. 208-209), Heidegger had observed thus about language:

> The reality of something is not known by careful analysis or reduction but by natural experience which is created by the use of language in everyday life.  What is real is what is experienced through the natural use of language in context…. It is in words and language that things first come into being and are…

In a similar vein, an ancient Chinese sage had also highlighted the importance of language in the task of nation building. As reported by Hahn (1998, p. 110), the disciples of the sage had asked him what he would do first if he were given power to set right the affairs of his country. The sage answered:

> I will certainly see to it that languag e is used correctly. The disciples looked perplexed. Surely the disciples said, this is a trivial matter. Why should you deem it so important? And the master replied: If language is not used correctly; then what is said is not what is meant; if what is said is not what is meant, then what ought to be done remains undone; if this remains undone, morals and art will be corrupted, if morals and art are corrupted,

justice will go astray; if justice goes astray, the people will stand about in helpless confusion

Curiously, language as a major resource in human communication has always been charged with distorting and biasing the way issues and events are understood (O'Shaugnessy and Stadler, 2007). Literature that embodies charges of bias in the way language (re)presents and /or distorts experience is as vast as it is fascinating. Bonvillain (1993) has described a slew of instances where, in her rather compelling argument, language has been used to encourage negative self-assessment of women. For instance, Bonvillain decries a pattern of "linguistic second place" given to females in expressions like, "male and female, husband and wife, boys and girls, man and woman" (pp. 204-213). Bonvillain charges such expressions with conferring secondary status on females.

Bonvillain has also conducted a generic analysis on the use of 'he' and 'man'. That analysis condemns the use of 'he' and 'man' to generically refer to male and female in ways that fail to factor in gender differences. Bonvillain's generic analysis resonates with Simpson's (1993) analysis of "man is a mammal which breast feeds his young and experiences difficulty in giving birth" (p. 168). Simpson characterises formulations like the one quoted above as an exemplar of what he refers to as the androcentric world-view. The androcentric world view, according to him, is obsessed with positive assessment of male activities in a manner that excludes those of women.

To further his exposition of these amazing discursive practices, Simpson cites Dale Spender. As cited, Dale Spender contends that by a straightforward act of linguistic appropriation, men have constructed a supremacist social position, a position, which Dale Spender insists, oppresses and excludes women. Waxing rather poetic, Spender claims: "*man made language, language controls reality, men control reality, men control women*" (Simpson, 1993, p.162).

Similarly, Oswald (2007) has discussed a representation of women in an Annual Report for the McDonald Corporation. Oswald's discussion focuses on the graphics that featured in the frame of the Annual Report. Using a cursory binary analysis which is based on direction of looks of humans in the frame, Oswald links the males in the frame with power, speech, action and self-control. Contrarily, according to Oswald's analysis, the frame links the females with passivity, silence, inaction and lack of self-control. The frame, according to her, did this by the way the female figure was depicted. The female figure was depicted sitting silently in the background, at a level below the men, with her eye looking up to them as if to silence her own voice by listening to them. Oswald's point is that the frame demonstrates how cultural archetypes translate into brand position that fails to reflect post-modern nuances of global consumer culture.

O'Shaugnessy and Stadler (2007, p.67) have discussed how meanings in English Language change over time. Such change, they contend, strengthens the status of men as it weakens that of women. O'Shaugnessy and Stadler exemplify, among others, with the master-mistress, bachelor-spinster, king-queen, courtier-courtesan, lady-lord binary formulations. According to them, bachelor is a social position with more positive values than spinster. Contrarily, spinster has been made to acquire connotation that describe women in terms of their sexuality. They, O'Shaugnessy and Stadler, are miffed more by the term 'queen' which they claim has been appropriated to denigrate homosexual men. According to them, the implication is that for a man to be feminised is a put-down.

It is not only in feminist struggle that the charge of biasing and distorting human perception is raised against language. Language text is also accused of distorting reality in other spheres of the social environment. For instance, Fairclough, (2001, p. 72) has discussed a discursive

practice in Hitler's *Mein Kampf* where the phrase "a people" a phrase that should denote composite individuals, was given the attribute of a single person. The goal of such attribution, as claimed by Fairclough, was to enable the person making the attribution to consider a whole nation as a single weakened individual who needs the 'genius' of a messiah-leader in order to rescue the weakened individual from the grip of an imaginary enemy. In a similar vein, Fairclough (2001, pp.106 & 148) cites instances in a speech by Margaret Thatcher, a former British Prime Minister. In the speech, the Prime Minister made imprecise use of the pronoun "*we*" in a manner that helped the government to put across what the government believed and did as what the people believed and did.

In his study of how major American newspapers reported Mike Tyson's rape trial, Lule, (1995, pp. 176-195) has also discussed how the newspapers used uncouth discursive styles to distort reality about Tyson. Lule had concluded that the papers adopted muted racist beliefs and steeped such beliefs in stereotypical portrayals in their coverage of the incident. Lule grounded this conclusion on, among others, texts like (i) "*Tyson is our savage side not our role-model.*" (ii) *"None of Tyson's advisers could tame the animal in him."* (iii) *D'Amato was in such a hurry to make a heavy-weight champion that he didn't make a human being."* (iv) *"When jurors came in they were not looking at him. He stood up grabbing at the tie around his throat."*

Apart from other compelling revelations made by Lule about how the papers over-dramatised what the papers' racist inclination impelled them to see as Tyson's bestiality, the text about what D'Amato did not do with Tyson draws, more than others, Lule's condemnation. For Lule, the implicit point in that text was not only to say that Mike Tyson was not a human being but to say, pragmatically, that Blacks are sub-human beings who needed the touch of other humans, especially the Whites, to attain a complete human status. Another interesting thing is the choice of word in the second part of sentence (iv) as displayed above. The use of the word 'grab' for somebody who is trying to adjust his tie connotes wildness and lack of decorum in the context it was used. Worse in that sentence is the word 'throat.' People are generally known to wear ties around their neck and not throat. The use of throat in that context could hardly serve any other purpose than to heighten the bestial portrayal of Tyson by the media. The use of throat instead of neck in that context is like saying that it is only humans that wear their tie around their necks. Since Tyson is not a human being, he should not be associated with the decency of wearing a tie around his neck but around his throat.

**THE PROBLEM**

Given the notion that discursive practices attain more public profile in discourses of the mass media (Fairclough 2001), there is a question Fairclough (2001) asks of the mass media and their workers. The question is whether media workers and, by extension, communicators are *conscious* of the manipulative potentials of their discursive practices.

Heightening interest in this question is the notion that communicators hardly reveal their true intention in their messages (Jowett & O' Donnell, 1999). Another puzzle of interest in this paper is the claim that communicators are often cajoled, unwittingly; to produce texts that connote some other meanings than the ones the text producer(s) had intended (Newcomb, 1991). Gripsrud (2002, p.135) has commented more instructively on this when he said that "the social semiotics and psychological dimensions of text production escapes the conscious control of text producers." In this particular instance, this paper investigates whether an advertisement agency that produced an advertisement for ICL home appliances was aware of the distortive sub-texts (Fairclough, 2001, pp. 43 & 215) in the advertisement they created.

Of interest also is what the agency did or could have done if they had known that the advertisement they created has perception-distorting potential.

## Procedure

The procedure for this paper is informed by documented analytical practices in qualitative research. Amongst these practices is the belief that a research design does not necessarily have to begin from a fixed starting point or proceed through a determined sequence of steps (Maxwell, 1996; Paulus, Woodside & Ziegler, 2008). Creswell (2007) gives further insight in respect of analytical steps in qualitative research. According to him, the qualitative research procedure is the whole process where the introductory section through to problem statement, data collection, analysis, interpretation and findings is handled as interrelated, simultaneous, cyclical but focused (Creswell, 2007, p.150). Maxwell (1996, p.2) encapsulates the tenets of this approach when he noted that in a qualitative interactive research design "the activities of collecting and analyzing data, developing and modifying theory, elaborating or refocusing the research questions and eliminating validity threats usually go on more or less simultaneously, each influencing all of the other."

In the above light, this paper adopted a procedure that provided the greatest opportunity to gather the most relevant data vis-à-vis the phenomenon under investigation (Straus & Corbin, 1990, p.181). Furthermore, this paper's procedure premises the notion that sampling in a qualitative research is best done with a small sample purposively selected for its *typicality and homogeneity* as the best typical example that represents or reflects what other samples that were left out might have offered (Maxwell, 1996; Dijk, 2006).

On the above light and also, in deference to the view that "…there does not and probably cannot exist a predictive theory in social science," ( Flyvbjerg, 2006, p. 223), this paper's data (Meyers, 1997, Myers, 2009) were sourced from what a *focus group* did with an advertisement copy and how the creators of the advertisement reacted to what the focus group did with the advertisement. According to Kitzinger and Barbour, (1999, P. 4), in a focus group interaction, participants are usually  "encouraged to talk to one another; asking questions, exchanging anecdotes and commenting on each other's experiences and points of view."   The subject of the focus group interaction was an advertisement text (Fairclough, 2001, p. 20; O'Shaugnessy, 2007, p. 91; Eco, 1976, p. 276) used to market Ignis range of home appliances. Though, the marketing campaign for this range of appliances was multi-media, the copy of particular interest in this study was the one on page 23 of Nigeria's *ThisDay* newspaper of May 21, 2002. As stated earlier, the choice of this sample was hinged on its *typicality* as the best example that represents or reflects what other samples that were left out might have offered (Maxwell, 1996). This advertisement copy is selected for analysis in order to ascertain what the advertising agency that created the advertisement might have done unwittingly (Keyton, 2001). The advertisement under investigation has its headline as:

> *Your wife is having an affair*

The opening text/paragraph goes thus: "the number of things we can get your wife to do is virtually endless…" Without prejudice to other suggestive innuendos lurking in the advertisement copy, the "lexically specific word" '*wife*' (Simpson, 1993, p. 172; Fairclough, 2001, 107) fascinated and heightened my interest in the advertisement copy. Pursuant to the interest, I decided to submit the advertisement copy to a focus group procedure to enable me assess how the members will read the advertisement copy. Making up the focus group were discussants with skills in Critical Discourse Analysis (Wodak & Meyer, 2006). The focus group members were chosen from graduate-students. The post-graduate training has endowed the discussants with "*diagnostic"* and/or "*symptomatic"* reading skills (Gripsrud, 2002,

pp.140-144; Simpson, 1993, p. 115). Symptomatic and diagnostic reading skill enables the possessor to identify innuendos, sub-texts and distortive meanings in texts (Fairclough, 2001, p. 20; O'Shaugnessy, 2007, p. 91; Eco, 1976, p. 276).

The discourse analysis skill of the focus group members was not tasked much before they spotted in the advertisement, the lexical specific word *wife*. The discussants were unanimous in their understanding of what the lexical specific word *wife* pragmatically connotes in the advertisement text. According to them, the lexically specific word *wife* in that advisement implicitly encoded an assumption that the advertisement was unwittingly targeted at only married men and not even at bachelors or women. Their logic for arriving at such meaning is as follows: By Nigerian custom, it is only men who marry wives. As a result, when *your wife is having an affair* is used as an advertisement copy to sell a product, there is no way the addressee of the message could be any other sex than only married men; not even bachelors.

 I approached ICL, the advertising agency that created the advertisement and showed them the reading their advertisement had provoked. I asked them whether they had a hunch that their advertisement copy was going to trigger such reading. They denied strongly that they never meant to trigger such when they created the advertisement.  I further asked them to comment on whether they were aware of but ignored, at the time of creating the ad, the possibility that the advertisement was going to trigger this kind of women-exclusion reading. They denied such awareness.

When I asked them whether they do, as a point of duty, exercise some caution against possible aberrant decoding (Morgan & Welton, 1992) of their advertisement by respondents, ICL answered in the affirmative saying that if it had occurred to them that such aberrant decoding was going to crop up in this particular advertisement, that they would have created the advertisement in a style which might foreclose the aberrant reading. When I asked them what they wanted the advertisement to communicate, they said that they were playing on the idea of the joy which having an affair gives. They said their main assumption was that having an affair gives some intense enjoyment that is not always found in routine but legitimate intimacy. According to them, that copy was a metaphor for saying that the intensity of the fun which the use of Ignis range of home appliances delivers on those (irrespective of sex) who use the appliances can only be compared with that which people who have affair enjoy.

## DISCUSSION

The data made available by the ICL case as presented above affirms the notion of *indeterminacy of meaning*. This notion has been stoking curiosity in critical textual analysis (Birch, 1989). For instance, ICL's explanation that aberrant decoding/reading of their texts by respondents belies  their conscious effort at ensuring that such does not happen resonates with the notion (Birch, 1989) that meanings are not simply put into a text by writer/speaker but are constructed by reader/hearer. Eco (1976, p. 276) has also affirmed the reality of indeterminacy of meaning when he wrote that " a text is a multiple source of unpredictable speech act whose author remains undetermined, sometimes being the sender of the message, at other time the addressee who collaborates in determining the meaning of the text." ICL's admission also confirms the notion that "the social semiotics and psychological dimensions of text production escape the conscious control of text producers" (Gripsrud, 2002, .p135). Alertness to the ideas of Gripsrud as presented above might have prompted Kunczik (1995, p.178) to argue that:

No simple instruction can be given on shaping mass media texts or journalistic products with a view to effect which would be applicable always and everywhere. The conditions under which the media operate are too complex for that.

## CONCLUSION

The data generated from ICL – the advertisement agency that produced the studied advertisement – confirm the notion that the process of text production involves a complex uncontrollable psychological subtlety. This subtlety exposes text producers to doing unwitting and unplanned things (Newcomb, 1991). This fact underscores the need to adhere to a call by Sillars and Gronbeck (2001). Sillars and Gronbeck call on communication scholars to analyse messages for messages' obvious and non-obvious moves to control/distort reality in ideological way. To heighten their call, Sillars and Gronbeck argue that oppressive power relations are not maintained by direct threat or physical coercion but by kinds of talk (texts) that rationalise, justify, and reinforce economic, political and social inequalities. Birch (1989, p.31) has cited Burton to reinforce Sillars and Gronbeck's view. By citing Burton, Birch encourages scholars to increase their effort at the kind of analysis that aims at ridding human societies of racist, classist and sexist injustices.

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