LANGUAGE AND IDEOLOGY:
A CASE STUDY OF 'SESAME STREET'

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Language has a crucial role in the ideological process. It is the linking element between individuals' knowledge of the world and their social practices, since it mediates individuals' thought and behaviour. I intend in this paper to demonstrate how language reflects ideology and can thus be used not only as a means of communication, but also as an instrument of power and control.

Theoretical Background

The connection of linguistic studies with the society which a given language represents is proposed by, among others, Kress and Hodge (1979). They suggest that Linguistics might achieve a wide scope so as to help individuals understand each other and the world in which they live. Similarly, Hodge, Kress and Jones (1979) draw attention to the importance of language for the study of ideology:

> Ideologies are sets of ideas involved in the ordering of experience, making sense of the world. This order and sense is partial and particular. The systems of ideas which constitute ideologies are expressed through language. Language supplies the models and categories of thought, and in part people's experience of the world is through language. (p. 81)

Fairclough (1989) introduces the term Critical Language Study (CLS) emphasizing that this approach to language study is an attempt to demystify what, through language, may be hidden from people. In this sense Critical Language Study may help individuals to become aware of the processes of domination through language.

The ideological aspect of language does not lie in the linguistic system, which is autonomous, but in the use of language, which is not (Fiorin, 1988). As products of their relations with others and of their comprehension of these relations, individuals interpret their experiences according to their position in the economic structure of the society in which they live. Thus, representing people's minds and consequently embodying

different worldviews (Fowler et al., 1979), language reflects the structure of the society in which it is used.

Exactly because of the intrinsic social feature of language CLS requires an investigation of the socio-political context in which a given text is embedded. As part of an ongoing process, language cannot be cut up into static pieces. Rather, it should be analysed in the whole process of which a given text is a part.

The Power of Discourse

By 'discourse' I mean contextualized language, following Fairclough's (1989) and Kress' (1985) views. Fairclough defines discourse as "language as a form of social practice" (p. 22). He discusses in his work conventions in language use which are subordinate to social institutions. The subordination of language use to institutions, in Kress, is already stated in his definition of discourse:

> Discourses are systematically-organized sets of statements which give expression to the meanings and values of an institution. Beyond that, they define, describe and delimit what it is possible to say and not possible to say (and by extension -- what it is possible to do or not to do) with respect to the area of concern of that institution, whether marginally or centrally (p. 67)

According to the author, people's discourses are usually the voices of institutions, since various institutions control existing social groups, what they say, and consequently, what they do.

Although most of the authors discussed in this work concentrate on the analysis of verbal language as an instrument of domination, some call attention to the importance of paralinguistic as well as non-linguistic features which complement the meaning of words in discourse. As a matter of fact, Fairclough (1989) refers to visual language as the richest part of speech in the production of meaning.

Hayakawa (1978) suggests that words (discourse in general, I would add) make things happen, that is, they control people's attitudes. As the author explains, this control is not only made through explicit power relations such as commands and orders, but is also implicit, and usually more pervasive, when more indirect ways are used. Making a comment

about a certain product or a candidate for elections, for example, may convince someone to buy the product or vote for the candidate. According to Hayakawa (ibid.),

> With words... we influence and to an enormous extent *control future events*. It is for this reason that writers write; preachers preach; employers, parents, and teachers scold; propagandists send out new releases; statesmen give speeches. All of them, for various reasons, are trying to influence our conduct -- sometimes for our good, sometimes for their own. (p. 91)

For Bordieu (1983) the way people use language is quite relevant in expressing what they want to say and what they are. Language production involves selections among innumerous possibilities provided by the linguistic system and the use of certain choices reveals the speaker's/writer's intentions.

It is important to note that what is 'well said' is usually more convincing and that language not only reflects power relations, but is also a site of struggle. According to Fairclough (1989) social practices not only determine discourses; they are also determined by them. Kress (1985) states that language is used to code certain habits and through time it ends up reinforcing these habits. However, in the same way that habits are coded and reinforced they can also be altered. Therefore, one can change reality through changes in discourse. For Fairclough (1989), this is the view of discourse as a creative process, as opposed to the view of discourse as a consolidation of the actions of the powerful. The mutual influence between language and social practices is a simultaneous process which, according to Kress (1985), is explained by the historicism of facts in society. Thus, at a given moment, language determines individuals' thought and actions, while at another the reverse can occur. As suggested by Fairclough (1989), this permanent tension occurs because power is not linearly held by one part only. Both the powerful and the powerless struggle to impose their discourses; the powerful, trying to maintain the superiority, and the powerless, trying to achieve it. This permanent tension marks a dialectic movement between language and the society which it represents.

In his work Fairclough (ibid.) concentrates on the demystification of the implicit discourses conveyed by the powerful in capitalist societies. An intrinsic characteristic of the capitalist, class divided society, is its primary concern with capital/profit, rather than with labour/human beings.

The profit aimed at in capitalism is a privilege of a minority/dominant class (powerful), since the accumulation of a few people's richness requires the work of many. Thus, while the majority of the population in a given society works for their survival, the minority concentrates the wealth produced by the former. However, in order to grant the maintenance of their privileges, the dominant class needs to reproduce not only the economic relations, but also values and ideas (ideology) which sustain these relations. Necessarily partial, these values and ideas hide the existing unequal relations of power, as part of the dominant class's ongoing struggle to prevent the dominated class from taking power.

Demystifying the Dominant Discourse

The discourse of the dominant class is obscure, full of gaps, or unexplained facts, since it hides unequal relations of a class divided society, in order to maintain the dominant class privileges. Ianni (1976) draws attention to some points which are avoided by the dominant discourse: relations of antagonism, historical transformations, analytical perspectives which permit a globalizing view of relationships, and process and structures of assimilation and domination. All of these critical perspectives, compromised with objectivity and totality, threaten the coherence of the dominant discourse. As stressed by Lyra (1979:43),

> A ideologia da classe dominante ... está condenada a não se expressar, porque a verdade histórica a condena. No lugar de questionar a realidade (isto é, a si mesma), ela deriva para questões inconseqüentes e, quando se permite algum tipo de manifestação, esta se camufla artificiosamente em ardis semânticos pelos quais ela sonha com a legalização do privilégio.
> ... a ideologia dominante vai assim contornando a verdade em colocações ambíguas e foge da discussão para não colocar em questão esses privilégios ....

The more subtle the way the dominant class presents its concepts the more pervasive they are likely to be. Discussing the distinction between two types of power, coercion and consent, Fairclough (1989) mentions ideology as the means to obtain consent, since through ideology individuals are led to view reality acritically, alienating themselves from the objective facts. Coercive or direct power, on the other hand, is more likely to find resistance since the exploitative intention becomes explicit, resulting in the individuals' awareness and the consequent struggle to change reality.

According to Fiorin (1988), critical discourse emerges from conflicts and contradictions existing in reality. Once the dominated class realizes the dominant discourse diverges from reality, they struggle to change this reality. Firstly, by unveilling the incoherences of the dominant discourse, and then, by presenting an objective and coherent discourse.

The dominant class discourse can be uncovered from the surface, which is the level at which the ideological determinations of the deep structure become apparent. As ideology works at the phenomenological level, or level of appearance (Fiorin, ibid.), verbally, the structure of the discourse, including omissions, classifications and other linguistic choices, signals the text producer's intentions, as pointed out by Fowler et al. (1979:3):

> We show how linguistic structures are used to explore, systematize, transform and often obscure, analyses of reality; to regulate the ideas and behaviour of others; to classify and rank people, events and objects; to assert institutional or personal status. Many of the processes mentioned here happen automatically, eluding the consciousness of source and recipient.

Non-verbally, all the visual and paralinguistic features are elements which transmit ideology. As claimed by Bakhtin (1988), all ideological symbols are materialized in form of sound, colour, physical mass or any other material form constituting thus a fragment of reality.

A CLS of 'Sesame Street'

In order to illustrate how language conveys ideology I will next develop a CLS of the American educational television program 'Sesame Street' ('SS' from now on). I try to demonstrate through linguistic and semiotic analyses that the language of the program reinforces the dominant American discourse, consolidating thus the 'actions of the powerful'.

As has been mentioned, the social-political environment which gives birth to a certain text is crucial to explain its hidden messages. In the following paragraphs I discuss some of the dominant values conveyed by the North American society. In addition, I refer to television, the powerful means used to transmit 'SS', and to the program itself.

a) The Dominant American Ideology

The North American ideology is primarily concerned with its

superiority over other societies. Qualities such as self-reliance, courage, competitiveness, pragmatism and adventure are clearly values conveyed by the dominant American ideology and they are spread not only in the American society, but also in other countries, as part of the so called American imperialist capitalism. Those features mentioned, and others (respect to individuality, cooperation, dynamism...) are the ones which emerge in the discourse of the dominant American class (Fichou, 1990; Mattelart, 1979). Though positive at first sight, they are treated in an abstract and partial form sustaining, in the context of the American reality, other implicit features which constitute the American target of domination. In the analysis of the Disney productions by Schiller and Mattelart and Dorfman (cited in Caparelli, 1986) the authors found recurrent values which they define as typical of the dominant American ideology: consumerism, colonialism, classism, and imperialism. These hidden values emerge as a result of the set of explicit language articulated in the dominant class discourse.

b) Television

Television is an extremely powerful means, not only because of the seducing character of vision, but also because of the wide range of public it reaches.

Sodré (1984) relates the visual aspect of television with its power to dominate the audience, although the intention to dominate is never made explicit. Despite showing reality "in the eyes" of the audience, television has the power to blind them since the reality constructed is fragmented, crystallized, ahistorical. The images presented are not real, but ideal; there is not a concrete reference with reality and the audience is psychically, rather than physically touched. The author claims that television is paradoxical in that, while assuring its faithfulness to reality, it leads the audience to an imaginary world without any concrete reference. In the magic world of television -- "telerealidade" -- everything becomes possible.

Fernandes (1990) refers to the important role of television in the work of reproducing the dominant ideology, as mentioned below:

> Os meios culturais de comunicação comercializada, com a televisão à frente, multiplicaram por mil a hegemonia ideológica das elites das classes dominantes. (p. A-3)

As an instrument of the State at the sphere of superstructure, television is used as a means to reproduce dominant values. For Caparelli

(1986) television is included in the "hegemonic project" of the dominant class with the intention of creating in the audience, since childhood, an internalization process of the dominant class worldviews.

The discourse of television, and hence of 'SS', as part of the dominant class discourse, tends to be, in essence, full of contradictions, since it hides unequal relations of power in a class divided society.

c) 'Sesame Street'

It is a consensus among critics that 'SS' is a high quality program. As a matter of fact, some authors see 'SS' as an alternative to the poor options of children's television. It is undeniable, however, that 'SS' is also a subtle means of transmission of the dominant American values. Yet, the real values conveyed are masked by the pedagogical claims and the sophisticated techniques employed. According to Mattelart (1979),

> Com o Vila Sésamo apareceu a nova fase do imperialismo cultural que tenta mascarar a penetração ideológica com um apelo pedagógico e uma suposta neutralidade das mensagens dirigidas às crianças. Esta série marca uma mudança nas técnicas de 'controle de mentes'.... (p. 123)

Caparelli (1986) draws attention to the American environment in which 'SS' emerged. He reports that the program originated in the 60's as a reaction to urban revolts in the USA (result of poverty, recial problems, etc...). With the aim of bringing children from the American ghettos to participate in society, 'SS' conveys the implicit idea that education is the solution for all problems.

d) Linguistic Categories and Semiotic Elements -- Analyses

The analyses carried out in this paper are a sample of wider analyses. Due to lack of room just parts of speech events are discussed here. The examples are presented together with a description of the linguistic categories to be explored. Specifically, I look into the following extracts of the program: 'School Song', the interaction between Little Girl and Super Grover, the 'Women's Chorus', and the relationship between a teacher and her kindergarten pupils.

I try to show how implicit social meanings can be grasped from the (explicit) formal features of the texts, as well as from the situational context. I also attempt to explain the meanings of the texts in a wider

dimension. Here I include elements from the society which has created 'SS' and its implicit institutional discourses.

Hartley and Motgomery (n.d.) distinguish two moments of analysis of press and television news: the *Representational* and the *Relational*. The authors use these terms to refer to both linguistic and extra-linguistic features, since the media produce not only verbal but also non-verbal language. In the group of black boys singing the 'School Song', for example, one can observe how verbal and non-verbal language are organized so as to convey the discourse of the powerful. As for the verbal part of the song we have:

> School, you love school
> School is where you wanna be
> And it is really plain to see that you'll
> Learn a whole lot more than you ever
> Knew before at school
>
> You can show things, you can tell things,
> You can even learn to spell things down at school
> There is a teacher there to teach you
> Every letter, number, /?/ and rule
> Come and meet me in the classroom
> I'm telling you it's really cool
> In the school room there is a bookshelf
> Where all /?/
> All the stories that they wanna read you
> And when snacktime rolls around
> They've got cookies, milk and juice to feed you
> ...
> /If/ you asked me, will I like it, man?
> Well, I'm telling you're guaranteed to
> ...
> In the school you'll play games and
> Have the best time you ever had
> They even got a nurse you can visit
> when you're feeling bad
> ...

Through the Representational level, one analyses how the world of the text is constructed. In this sense, the choice of 'SS' producers to portray poor black Americans singing in defense of the American school indicates the producers' view. Although the capitalist system does not allow

a great proportion of poor blacks to go to school, 'SS' conveys the idea that there is school for everybody.

The representation of reality in any text also involves a certain position in relation to an addressee, and this has to do with the Relational level. The black singers establish a relationship of confidence with the public through linguistic devices, as well as through their visual images: colour, clothes and gesture.

Classification, among other categories of the Representational moment, is related to the choice of words selected from numerous alternatives to refer to reality. It is, for Fowler and Kress (1979:210) "...the linguistic ordering of the world...". Readers can evaluate the text producers' positions through the way they classify the world. Further examining the black singers' example, it can be noted that the school is connected to pleasure all through the lyrics as in "love", "play games", "best time", "learn", "like", "really cool", and so on. This acritical defense of school conveys a distorted view of reality, consolidating thus the dominant discourse which tries to hide the role of school as an institution for reproduction of the dominant ideology.

Another example of Classification is in the scene showing the relationship between Little Girl and the fake hero Super Grover. The girl is at home trying to work with her computer, but there is a problem. Super Grover then comes, in an attempt to help the 'defenceless' girl make her computer work again, but he fails. Super Grover is literally a failure, although he does not think so. When he leaves the girl's home he says "adios", signalling thus close relation with the Hispanics.

It can be noted that the context of the program emphasizes the use of the Spanish language. In addition, many of the 'SS' characters are Hispanic, as a consequence of the significant proportion of Hispanics in the United States. Hence, the fact that Super Grover says "adios" rather than "good bye" can be interpreted as a subtle devaluation of the Hispanic culture, as it is put in the mouth of an anti-hero, and the consequent valorization of the American culture.

Fairclough (1989) defines *Relational Modality* as the expression of relations of authority among participants. Some of the linguistic elements which signal this relation are: modal auxiliary verbs, adverbs, and the way participants address each other. The use of Mr. and Ms., and the indefinite 'you' to express solidarity are examples in which one conveys a certain manner of dealing with an addressee. The use of personal pronouns and more or less formal words also indicate degrees of intimacy, respect and directedness, according to Fairclough (ibid.) and Fowler and Kress (1979). The black singers, for example, establish an intimate relation with the audience through the use of direct address in the pronouns "you", "I" and

"me", placing themselves as colleagues of the boys and girls who watch them:

> Come and meet me in the classroom. I'm telling you, it's really cool.

The group also makes clear that they do not have any close relation to the school as the pronoun "they" is used to refer to the people at school.

In addition to the elements mentioned above, characters also speak black English, establishing greater identification with the audience. In this sense, the program tries to reproduce the audience through these characters ('SS' is supposed to teach a low class audience) so that the audience can identify with them and thus accept their message without resistance.

In terms of the visual images, the camera viewpoint is also important in establishing relations between addresser and addressee (Hartley and Montgomery, n.d.) This way, through direct eye-contact and by pointing their fingers, characters in the program establish a realistic relation with the audience, outside the fantastic world of the program. It is as if they were really identifying with the audience and demanding students to commit themselves to going to school.

A second illustration of Modality is in the chorus of women puppets who present a narrative about women's historical changes in society. Dressed up in uniforms which signal professions belonging to the male world, these puppets draw attention to women's abilities, and talk about their repressed lives in the past, as well as about their present as 'emancipated' women. These are the words to the lyrics:

> A: I'm thrilled to be here [before song starts]
> Chorus: Women can fly way up high on trapezes
> M: Women can be /roller skaters/
> Chorus: Women can help to find cures for diseases
> B: Women can hunt alligators
> Chorus: Pilots and poets, policewomen too
> Look at the things that we women can do
>
> M: We can be clowns
> A: We can be cooks
> C: We can be bus drivers
> D: We can /?/
> Chorus: Just look around you, it's easy to see
> There's nothing we women can't be

G: /?/
D: I used to be good with a needle and thread
  I'd sew dainty dresses of blue
  Then I got an urge to be a great surgeon
  And now I sew people up too
Chorus: Then she got an urge to be a great surgeon
  And now she sews people up too.
E: Margareth, tell about the cat!
M: Once I had a cat that I tried to teach tricks
  Quiet and sweet it could be
  The tricks I was trying required a lion
  And that's why I'm here in this ring
Chorus: The tricks she was trying required a lion
  And that's why she's here in this ring

F: I used to go bicycling far from may home
  My mother would say 'come back soon'
Chorus: Come back soon!!
F: I travelled so fast off the earth in a blast-off
  Now I'm on my way to the moon
Chorus: She travelled so fast off the earth in a blast-off
  5, 4, 3, 2, 1 .... 'F' launches as a rocket
  Now she's on her way to the moon.

Chorus: Women can ride up inside of a rocket
B: Women can be /oftenly/ clever
Chorus: /?/
M: Women can be soda jerkers
Chorus: Pilots and poets, policewomen too
  Look at the things that we women can do

M: We can be clowns
A: We can be cooks
C: We can be bus drivers
D: We can write books

G: We can catch fish
E: We can train dogs
F: We can climb mountains
M: We can chop logs

Chorus: Just look around you, it's easy to see

THERE'S NOTHING WE WOMEN CAN'T BE

The modal 'can' in "There's nothing we women can't be" indicates that the group is announcing and thus trying to convince their colleagues (audience) of their abilities. In addition, the group uses the imperative form, trying, in a more impositive manner, to make women open their eyes and see, as they say: "Look at the things that we women can do!"

The women's liberation is defined here exclusively by their infiltration into the male world, since there is no process of reciprocal exchanges between the sexes. These women also show agressiveness (tone of voice, imperative and modal) in the announced transformation. They attempt to take the men's role not only in this respect, but also in projecting an image of super-heroines ("There's nothing we women can't be").

Similarly to this representation of women, in other sketches the program also shows women immature in their liberation process when they do not portray stereotypes.

Interactional Conventions, for Fairclough, (1989), consist of the "organizational" features of texts which signal the participants' control of the interactions. Firstly, the author refers to the *Turn-Taking Systems*, that is, the exchange of turns between participants. He also observes that the participants' turns depend on relations of power. In informal conversation between equals, participants are supposed to negotiate their turns. On more formal occasions, however, the powerful impose constraints not only in the taking of turns, but they also control the topic of the conversation.

Secondly, Fairclough draws attention to how the powerful party *controls* the other *participants' contributions* through: Interrupting, Enforcing Explicitness, Controlling Topic and Making Formulation (rewording of implicit and explicit meanings in order to: check understanding or impose one's views).

The film of a real class shows the teacher discussing computer use with her kindergarten pupils. The way the teacher directs the event, her tone of voice, as well as the distribution of pupils around the classroom (in circles) indicates an egalitarian relation between teacher and pupils. Nevertheless, the teacher still exercises power over the children, following contraints of the situation. She chooses the topic for discussion ("What do you think a computer is?") and controls the topic through a series of questions ("What else can we do with computers"?, "How are we different from computers?"). In addition, the teacher interrupts pupils when they speak together, telling them to speak one at a time ("Wait, wait...") and

evaluates the children's answers ("That's right!," "hm, hm!).

Here, as in other sketches of the program, one can observe the woman playing a stereotype role, since her powerful position is a consequence of her authority as a teacher. Work with children is a continuation of the housing tasks. The stigmatized view of women as incapable is observed in this respect, since their task is restricted to the world of the house and the children. The program portrays a stereotype here in the sense that it reflects the reality which restricts the world of the woman. The teaching profession is one of the few professions socially 'permitted' to women.

Through the CLS developed here I have attempted to demystify the dominant discourse existing in 'SS' (a product of the American capitalism) and thus cooperate to a process in which the counter-ideology becomes hegemonic. The importance of CLS is in its contribution for the individuals' awareness of their roles as agents rather than patients of their own historical processes.

The synthetic analyses developed in this paper reveal implicit values of classism, racism as well as imperialism in the black boys' song. Through the Hispanic fake hero the program also conveys the American's superiority, as it devalues the Hispanics.

In terms of the discourse of gender the two examples discussed indicate: the portrayal of a stereotype (the role of teacher is traditionally attributed to women), and an *apparently* revolutionary model. Although the women's chorus tries to convince the spectators that women have changed, their changes are restricted; they do not point to any greater, structural dimension of society.

The ideas described above are some of the values with which the program deals, in an abstract form. As they are transmitted, they tend to be absorbed (to a lesser or greater degree) by the audience, thus legitimating social inequalities of the American society.

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