LANGUAGE AND WAR: IS THERE A CONNECTION?

by Johan Galtung

Center of International Studies
Princeton University
Princeton, New Jersey 08544

November 1986

1. Language and War: The problem of semantics

In exploring the problem posed in the title of this paper a distinction between semantics and syntax of a language may be useful. At the level of semantics we may look at words and see what they stand for, at sentences and what they stand for, at texts and what they stand for. At the level of syntax we would look at the internal structure of sentences and texts, trying to see whether in that structure, in the deeper code of the language, there is a hidden message tilted in favor of peace, or in favor of war, to put in dramatically simplified manner.

Of course, there is much to find at the level of semantics. There are countless euphemisms for everything belligerent, introduced into the language skillfully, and deliberately so. Starting with the word "defense" itself: a term that is used with no consideration at all whether the weapons and weapons systems discussed are inherently defensive or inherently offensive, whatever the motivations might be. From there one might go on to "modernization" a euphemism for new weapons, playing on the fascination people in Western cultures, presumably the cultures of modernization, would have for anything "modern", and the fear bordering on horror of being stuck with something "old-fashioned", left behind.

From there one might proceed to the notion of "balance of power", a term covering everything from parity to supremacy, as the term is used both by physicists and by accountants.

"Balance" sounds so moderate, so constrained: who could be against balance, which human could be against a balanced person? Nobody would argue in favor of imbalance or an unbalanced person--hence, by implication, balance or power must be good.

Then, we move on to the slogan used by the US Air Force: "Peace is our profession." Much has been made out of the world "peace" in this connection, I would underline profession. Who could be against being professional? And particularly against peace professionals, what could be better?

And one could move on to the name introduced by the Reagan Administration for one of its many people-killers: The "Peace-maker." The archetypical euphemism if there ever was one; like "counter-value attack" for destroying cities, "collateral damage" for killing millions, "clean bombs" when the killing is not by radiation, "surgical clean strikes" when no "innocent people" are killed - all of them preparing people for the unacceptable.

And we might end up with Star Wars never referred to as such, but as "Strategic Defense Initiative", SDI. To refer to it as anything else is close to a linguistic crime as defined by those who define the language in this connection: Washington. All these words are positive: strategic thinking and acting is a necessity; a defensive poster connotes peace; but on the other hand initiative also has to be taken.

Then, let us turn to the other side, to how whatever refers to peace is somehow expressed negatively. Peace is seen as "absence of violence," not violence as absence of peace. Correspondingly, a vegetarian is

one who does <u>not</u> eat meat, a person who eats meat—presumably being
normal--not being referred to as a non-vegetarian or
as a "meatist". The way this is expressed linguistically in
English is by means of the particle "non", a negation. Thus, a
very positive, assertive and affirmative way of fighting in a
conflict is referred to as "<u>non-violence</u>", and if the conflict is
similar to a war rather than similar to a revolution the type
of defense used "<u>non-military defense</u>", presumably carried out
by "<u>non-military</u>" persons. Of course, those people are also referred
to as civilians and the defense as civilian defense--but for some
reason the term has not quite stuck. Maybe a better term would
be positive struggle, leaving, by implication, "negative struggle"
to the military? And by implication, maybe "<u>non-cooperation</u>" as
one of the techniques of that type of struggle not cooperating
with evil--should be referred to as "autonomy", leaving to people
who cooperate the onus of being "non-autonomous"? In other words
find positive, assertive language: do not see peace as a deviation
to be singled out terminologically, or even as a negation of the normal.

A related but slightly different example is the term "<u>non-</u>
<u>governmental</u>" for organizations that by implication are not
governmental, the governmental being the normal in international
affairs, the non-governmental being a deviation. What about
"<u>peoples' organizations</u>" for those, leaving to the governments the
possibility of referring to themselves as "<u>non-people</u>" organizations?
Governments may not like that, nor is there any reason why others
should enjoy being referred to as "non-governmental".

In other words, there is terminological work to do, and great attention should be given to these matters. And yet I do not think these are the most important linkages between language and peace and war: those linkages are probably found at another and deeper level.

2.   Language and War: The problem of syntax

By no means arguing "as you speak, you also think" it would be even more foolhardy to argue that thought is totally independent of speech.   And the same would apply to action: of course there is some kind of relation.   But exactly what this relation is seems to be problematic.   What is done here is only to offer some hypotheses, by no means as articles of faith, merely as interest- ing themes to be explored.

Let me take as a point of departure an important aspect of nazi German war films.   When German troops were successful in the Soviet Union German soldiers were of course marching, and there was martial music.   More significantly, they were marching from left to right, in the direction we write and read in Indo- European languages.   This is the direction of forward, onward.

Then came Stalingrad, defeat, retreat.   But in the movies German soldiers were still marching, and there was still martial music.   And most interestingly: the soldiers were still marching from left to right, not from right to left which would be backwards rather than forwards, retreat rather than advance.   In other words, these nazi professionals were giving considerable attention to such deeper aspects of symbolism, there is no reason to believe that this was done by chance.   The retreat was orderly, triumphant almost, and--as mentioned--no retreat at all.

So, let us simply start with the hypothesis that there is
some kind of relationship between linear movement in general,
and from left to right in particular on the one hand, and advance,
forwards/onwards, even aggression and belligerence on the other.

Undoubtedly this is a rather weak hypothesis. Nobody would
deny that language is important, and not only in its oral but
also in its written form. The spatial ordering of language
should, consequently, also be important in giving ideas about how
space is structured. The point is not only linear versus circular
or some other form that makes space somehow curve in on itself,
like a snake swallowing its own tail as opposed to a snake on a
linear movement,possibly even pursuit of somebody else's tail.
There is another aspect: is the structuring of space supplied with an
arrow, making movement irreversible, or could one talk about a
two-way traffic?

At this point let us have a bird's eye view of the history
of languages, focussing on essential points relating exactly to
this problématique. We do not know for how long a time human
beings have communicated in oral form in something similar to
what today is referred to as a language. But let us assume that
the capacity for oracy,following Professor Topping's interesting
exploration[2] of the distinction between oracy and literacy, has
a certain structure and that structure has been with us for a
long time. For written language, however, more is probably known

and Professor Topping's distinction between three phases is
important. A first phase, possibly starting 6000 years ago, where
ideograms were used, often engraved on tablets, stones etc. A second
phase more like 3000 years ago, where letters were introduced, chained
together in sentences, and the sentences being linked together in
texts. It is at this point large-scale linearity enters the picture,
not implying that ideograms could not also be organized in a linear
manner. But with the introduction of letters, alphabets and so on
the level of irreversibility, meaning that the text could only be
read in one direction not in others, increased tremendously. And
this then became a basic social fact in the third phase where
literacy increasingly became or is becoming universal, hardly one
hundred years old. We are still in that phase with various
countries of the world in various stages along the dimension of
literacy, some of them even entering a phase of reduced literacy
or an-alphabetization, deskilling even in the basics.

    Professor Topping summarizes the basic points about literate
and non-literate societies, as being high on literacy and high on
oracy respectively, in the following table from his "The Tyranny
of Literacy" (see next page).

    Some comments on the table in connection with the basic
hypothesis explored here.

TABLE 1: Literacy vs. oracy according to D. M. Topping

Literate Societies	Non-literate Societies
Literacy: reading, spelling and writing skills are rewarded.	Oracy: eloquence of speech, imagination and memory are rewarded.
Literature: stories are "heard" through print: great literature is read only in school setting.	Oralature: stories are told to living audiences; great epics are preserved and transmitted by popular demand.
Law: rules for social organization and conduct codified by specialists in non-standard jargon, written, filed, and catalogued; arbitrated by appointed specialists.	Custom: rules for social organization and conduct, known and understood by all, and arbitrated by designated authority.
Information storage: data books, files, archives, libraries: memory is suspect, denigrated.	Memory storage: select individuals are repositories of information; memory is honored, developed.
Rationality, logic, reason are supreme values; wisdom defined through intellect as defined by calculated measurement.	Spiritualism, instinct, empathy, knowledge of the past and capacity to explain are indicators of wisdom.
Logical, analytic, conceptualization and linear, thinking, taught in schools and held as the perfect model.	Wholistic conceptualization: less concern with analysis of constituent parts, but rather how they work together.
Individualization, privacy, alienation, isolation: the _id_ is a thing in itself.	Communal, cooperative, familial; the _id_ is part of a larger entity.
Success-failure image; begins with early literacy experience in school.	Each individual has an appropriate place in the system, even if a hierarchical one.

The argument might be that the basic point is expressed in
dimension number six in the table where the logical, analytic and
linear, aspect of literacy is compared to a more wholistic con-
ceptualization, less concerned with analysis, in oracy. I think
there are many reasons why this can be said to be the case. One
is very simple: for oracy to obtain memory has to be cultivated,
for human memory to serve as a storage for large masses of infor-
mation a certain level of wholism has to be arrived at, a
Gestalt has to be formed. This is unnecessary when the informa-
tion is stored in a book for easy retrieval as long as the person
has some idea, roughly, where on the rather long string of words
(obtained if all lines of all pages are put on a long string after each
other) something would approximately be located. And this
point becomes even more important as literacy not only permits
us, but even forces upon us, a certain subdivision of speech down
to written letters, approximately mirroring phonemes in oral
communication (the minimum sound elements capable of carrying
some kind of meaning, in the sense of making a difference).

In other words, the stage is set for subdivision of commun-
ication into very small parts. To this one might object that
ideograms in general and the most important ideograms today,
the characters in Chinese/Japanese written communication, can also
be subdivided. But here the subdivision is essentially in sub-
characters carrying a meaning, although the process can also be
carried on to the basic unit, the "stroke". The problem would
only be that the stroke reflects nothing in and by itself, not

like a letter that carries a sound or a family of sounds, or a
family of letters carrying the same sound.

Between Topping's two columns one may intersperse societies
that are literate, but not in the sense of having alphabets.
And at this point a comparison might be made between European,
Chinese and Japanese languages, as is done in Table 2 (see next
page).[3]

In this table Topping's point is in a sense carried a step
further. The analytical scheme used brings in space, but in
addition to space also time, knowledge, person-nature, person-
person and person-transpersonal ideas with an effort to explore
how these are expressed in the languages. Reading Table 2
vertically the basic point made is that   Indo-European languages
tend to be linear the way they are written up, permitting only
one ordering of the words and hence only one reading--this is
the meaning of the word "rigid". Irreversibility might be an-
other expression for the same. What holds for space then also
holds for time: the same structure is found in the oral presenta-
tion, repeating the same sentence backwards would make very little
sense as opposed to what is possible in Chinese and Japanese where
particularly Chinese have a lower proportion of all those con-
nectives and filling words of various kinds used in Indo-European
languages. Thus, the Chinese quartet way of expressing ideas,
communicating that A relates to B like X relates to Y, is extreme-
ly economical and possible without many of the small words used

TABLE 2:   Languages as carriers of cosmology: A summary
           (from Galtung/Nishimura 1983)

	European	Chinese	Japanese
SPACE	linear rigid unambiguous	flexible ambiguous meta-meanings	flexible ambiguous meta-meanings
TIME	linear rigid	flexible meta-meanings	flexible meta-meanings
KNOWLEDGE	predicative abstract precise	relational concrete vague	relational concrete vague
PERSON-NATURE	nature and humans different	nature and humans same	nature and humans same
PERSON-PERSON	individualist	collectivist	collectivist and anti-individualist
	vertical and horizontal	vertical and horizontal	vertical mainly horizontal poorly
	ingroup and outgroup	ingroup only	ingroup only
	symbol: I	symbol: wŏ-men	symbol: hai
PERSON-TRANS- PERSONAL	soul vs. body dichotomy	no soul	no soul
	God vs. humans dichotomy	no God	no God

in Indo-European languages, meaning words that are neither nouns nor verbs; nor qualifiers of nouns and verbs, adjectives or adverbs.

However, even more important is how languages steer our epistemology, organize the whole dimension of knowledge--again, not in any unambiguous way, but in the sense of making us incline in one direction rather than the other. Indo-European languages typically are built around the SPO configuration, subject--predicate-object,meaning that there is somewhere an actor or something that acts, doing something to an object. In a simplified form one may talk about the SP configuration: something is said about ("predicated") of a subject. Correspondingly, Chinese and Japanese are relational, with a more symmetric relationship between S and P than the unilinear, irreversible relation typical of Indo-European languages. In addition Chinese and Japanese are vague as opposed to the precision of Indo-European languages where P either applies to S or not. Chinese and Japanese would be more inclined to state that there is a relation, some kind of connection between S and P, less to state whether that relation factually obtains or not.

Then, Indo-European languages have built into them an ease with which distinctions can be made between nature and humans (certain personal pronouns for the former. nonpersonal pronouns like "it" for the latter, and possibility of besouling things or nature, talking about her and him). Importantly: Indo-European

languages are rich in the use of personal pronouns, although this is more the case in some languages than in others, particularly in the Germanic languages such as English where the first personal pronoun singular is even capitalized. Nothing of that can be found in Chinese and particularly not in Japanese where so many linguistic methods are used to conceal the "I-ness" that would be in a statement if it were expressed in, for instance, English or German (or Norwegian for that matter).

The point to be made now is that we are probably dealing with a family of phenomena that are related to each other, maybe not in a way we are able to decipher today, but nonetheless in an interesting fashion. On the one hand, we would have the irreversible linearity of literacy, supported by the precision of statements where predicates are attributed to subjects, and more particularly to subjects that are active, even the speaker him/her-self. On the other hand we might have languages that are less clear in their spatial and temporal structure, that can be read both ways so to speak, that are relational rather than predicative and less unambiguous, more vague as to exactly what is stated, presenting phenomena as relations rather than as actions, with actors in general and the speaker in particular receding into the background. Some of this can already be said about ideogrammatic languages in general, what is interesting here is that Chinese and Japanese have some of these characteristics even in oral form. Thus, one might speculate whether a transition from ideograms to alphabets in the case of these two great civilizations

would also have implications for the way in which they conceive
of space and time and knowledge, relations to nature to people
and to transpersonal in general--in other words, that they would
become more "Indo-European" in general outlook.

3. Conclusion: Is there a connection?

And that brings us back to the point of origin: is there a relationship here? If there is one that relationship must be far from perfect: Japanese as a language has many of the opposite characteristics of Indo-European languages, yet Japan is a highly belligerent nation. <u>Or</u>, is it? They did "curve in on themselves" during the Tokugawa period, in isolation, thereby constituting a social form isomorphic with what has been said about the Japanese linguistic form. And how did they get out of Tokugawa? Not voluntarily. By being forced out, "joining other nations" as it was said, by somebody speaking a highly Indo-European language, English, with an American accent. From that time on Japan created her shintoism in the modern form, quite different from the original variety, quite able to serve some of the same functions for the Japanese as Yahweh for the Jews and God for the Christians and Allah for the Moslems. And a quick succession of wars followed.

So I would prefer to leave it as an interesting hypothesis: a relationship between linear, irreversible language presentation, and linear irreversible expansion into space. Forwards means forwards in both, onwards means onwards, never retreat means never retreat in both. The message is clear, almost too clear. And the world is moving from oracy to literacy, and from literacy for the elites to literacy to people in general. In other words, if there is something in the hypothesis even only as a weak factor

predisposing for expansionist behavior the linguistic develop-
ment of the world is not the one a peace researcher would
recommend. And the fourth stage, towards computeracy, even
universally so, in the same general direction of dichotomous, linear
thinking, intolerant of vagueness and--even more so--of contradic-
tions.[4]

Conclusion: no proof of any hypothesis, but a strong suspicion
that there is a high level of tenability. And another suspicion,
that the general world development in this field is not in the best
direction.

NOTES

1. This is also known as the Benjamin Whorf hypothesis, generally in disrepute because of too absolutist wording. See <u>Language, Thought and Reality</u>, Cambridge, MIT Press, 1956.

2. See D. M. Topping, "The Tyranny of Literacy", Honolulu, 1985; also the works by Walter J. Ong.

3. See Galtung, J. and Nishimura, I., "Structure, Culture and Languages: Indo-European, Chinese and Japanese Languages Compared", <u>Social Science Information</u>, 1983, pp. 895-925

4. See Galtung, J., "Computer Society; Present and Future", <u>Festschrift for Björn Christiansen</u>, Oslo 1987.