Language and Authenticity

IVANA MARKOVÁ

Social scientists come to understand social psychological phenomena partly through their subjects', or participants', use of language. Despite that, the linguistic characteristics and the role of language in the study of such phenomena remains largely unexplored. For example, one learns about the individual and social identity, social representations, the self concept, shared knowledge and so on, from the ways such phenomena are verbalised. However, the dialogical, semantic and pragmatic features of the expressions of identities or representations are rarely the focus of attention of social scientists. I consider the relationship between language and social psychological phenomena to be of crucial importance for the theoretical advancement of social psychology. Therefore, in this paper I wish to draw attention to the nature of this relationship through examining some aspects of what may be called authentic and inauthentic verbal expressions.

My interest in these matters is related to our research, during the last few years, into the social representations of democracy in Central and East European post-communist countries (e.g. Moodie *et al.*, 1995; Marková *et al.*, 1997). Social and political scientists and writers such as Simecka (1984), Havel (1992), Olshiansky (1989), have been persistently preoccupied with the breakdown of ethical principles and with the loss of identity due to the misuse of language in the post-communist countries of Central and Eastern Europe. The topic is, of course, too big to be examined here adequately. Yet, it is my view that it is theoretically intriguing and practically relevant to be raised, even if not fully explored, in this paper.

MISUSE OF LANGUAGE AND THE LOSS OF IDENTITY

Orwell's (1949) *Nineteen Eighty-Four* and Thom's (1987) *La Langue de Bois*, presented, in different ways, vivid images of the abuse of language in totalitarianism. They showed how totalitarian regimes and political powers, such as governments or

political parties, by misusing language, can destroy the existing social reality and substitute it by an invented one.

Orwell has forcefully shown what was called, in totalitarianism, 'the beauty of destruction of words', making the vocabulary smaller and the range of thought narrower. Stalin, in discussing the questions of Marxism and linguistics, drew attention to the changes in Russian language: many old words were no longer part of the lexicon; the meanings of many existing words changed; the structure of grammar changed. The Soviet linguist Marr went even further, claiming that, in communism, it will no longer be necessary to have either gestural or oral language because there will be a new, unique language, one for all, the language of thought (Marr, 1977, p. 24).

Thom described linguistic characteristics of a 'wooden language', focusing on syntax, the type of vocabulary and style, e.g. rhetorics, euphemisms and hyperbole. This language, moreover, is characterised by containing little semantic information, few references to reality and it uses mostly impersonal types of sentences. Sentences express imperatives and voluntaristic phrases. Thom points out that one can find the traces of wooden language everywhere in modern society. For example, scientific language has its specific jargon using nouns rather than verbs; bureaucratic and administrative language is characterised by impersonal style; and so on. However, Thom argued that it was the combination, the magnitude and the fact that it interpenetrated all spheres of life in the Soviet mass media and in the French communist party, that the language, so created, became totally different from ordinary language.

It is generally accepted by social scientists that it is through language that people express their self and identity (e.g. Bakhtin, 1986b; Harré, 1993; Havel, 1992; Klicperová, 1994). One can extend this general claim by pointing out the extent that people abuse language, say, by de-semanticizing it, they may deprive themselves of their self concept and of their identity. However, what can be meant by the phrase 'the loss of identity'? One cannot mean that the misuse of language leaves individuals concerned in a mental state in which they would be unable to say who they are or would be unable to carry out their daily routines in one way or another. Rather, what I mean here is a state of confusion as to where the individual concerned stands with respect to those things that matter in his or her life.

Concerning authenticity, I follow Trilling (1972) who takes it to be an ontological claim about humanity. To paraphrase Trilling, for a human being to be authentic means to be treated by others like a human being and not like a machine or a sub-human; it means to be attributed epistemic responsibility (Rommetveit, 1990). Such matters, however, are culture-specific and therefore, they cannot be discussed properly outside a cultural context. Theoretically, they are matters in the heart of social psychology; they concern the interdependence between language, personal identity and cultural collectivity. Since they are also part of our everyday life, their relationship necessarily has implications for social practices.

THE SELF AND THE ONTOLOGICAL STATUS OF WORDS

As a non-philosopher I take a very naive perspective with respect to 'the ontological status of ideations'. I agree with Bhaskar's (1979) criticism of the point of view that 'language is the house of being' (Heidegger, 1978, p. 213) but I adopt the perspective that the being that can be cognized by humans can be also communicated through language. In this sense, '[l]anguage and the word is almost everything in human life' (Bakhtin, 1986, p. 118).

This claim, however, can be interpreted in different ways. Consider, for example, the study of meaning. Traditional linguistic semantics, preoccupied with meaning and reference, would examine the nature of the relations between statements and facts in terms of truth conditions. More recent and contextually based theories would search for meanings in the recurring relations between situations and the speaker's use of language: in the speaker's attunement to the attunement of others (Barwise and Perry, 1983, p. 294). One can also consider meaning as a form of cultural collectivity, i.e. a form of linguistic consensus through which people understand each other; as an enactment of cultural collectivity in discourse.

Clearly, the ontological constraints with respect to what is considered to be meaning will be different in these three approaches. In the first case, the ontological status of language items has something to do with truth; in the second case, it is something to do with the types of situations and attunements of different orders. In the last case it has something to do with 'the order carved as much on the visible or invisible monuments of culture as on the human mind' (Moscovici, 1993, p. 340).

One could say that as a form of cultural collectivity, single words are no more than meaning potentials. Meaning potentials reflect cultural traditions, societal beliefs, attitudes and representations, i.e., the phenomena that are commonly distributed and treated by language-users as if real. They are evaluative and therefore they contain a common ethical code. They carry cultural experience and collective memory of the particular linguistic community. They provide, though, no more than a guarantee that, when used in utterances, they will be commonly understood by speakers of that language. It is through dialogue that we enact social representations distributed in cultures. Intersubjectivity, comes both from the self and the other. To use Bakhtin's phrase (or Mead's to that extent), I see myself as I think others might see me: 'I author myself'. Only the speaker and the listener authenticate the ontological status of words and utterances. Indeed, as Harré (1993) argued 'the only metaphysical commitment of the use of personal pronouns such as 'I' and 'you'' is that there are speakers who have the sense of self or identity, of time, location and responsibility for their actions. He finds the use of personal pronouns to be a final solution of the problem of the self (Harré, 1993, p. 113).

In the context of conversation analysis, Buttny (1993) argues that in talk people express, on the one hand, their identity and on the other, their 'folk

logic', i.e. accountability practices, a cultural system of moral and practical beliefs, norms and so on (Buttny, 1993, p. 165). Language itself is an object of social representations. It not only enacts, maintains and changes representations but representations, too, shape what speakers say. The heterogeneity of language genres and the multifaceted nature of social representations are interlinked.

THE SEMANTIC POWER AND DE-SEMANTIZATION OF WORDS

Consider an extreme case in which the phrase or an utterance can become inexpressible for fear of its effect. Douglas (1966) maintains that certain kinds of images evoked by some words evoke do not allow people to spell them out in language for fear that the very words might bring about calamity. Sontag (1979) refers to the names of diseases as having a magic power over people:

> In Stendhal's Armance (1827), the hero's mother refuses to say 'tuberculosis', for fear that pronouncing the word will hasten the course of her son's malady. And Karl Menninger has observed (in The Vital Balance) that 'the very word "cancer" is said to kill some patients who would not have succumbed (so quickly) to the malignancy from which they suffer' (Sontag, 1979, p. 10).

Similarly, in totalitarianism, the semantic power of some words and phrases can be omnipotent and whether uttered or written down, the speaker or the author may be attributed, by the regime, full responsibility for their imagined effect. By the same token, a word, when pronounced by the totalitarian authority, already determines the fate of the addressee. For example, Kalandra, a Czech intellectual murdered in 1951 in one of the monster-trials, was the only one who knew, from the very beginning of the process that he would be executed. It was the same kinds of words and phrases that were used during trials in 1937 in the USSR and during a Nazi process in 1939 that gave him a certainty of his fate; he had analysed, previously, these events in his publications (Kalandra, 1994).

   While in these cases, if uttered in a particular genre, the meaning of the word can have a tremendous power, in another case, the word can be silenced by the fact that its semantic meaning is partly or totally erased by the speaker. Havel (1992) illustrates such a case with an example which has become classic. It refers to the period in Czechoslovakia after the Russian invasion in 1968, known as 'normalisation'. The manager of a grocery shop places in the window of his shop, amongst the onions and carrots, the slogan 'Proletarians of the whole world – unite!'. The slogan arrived in his shop from the store together with vegetables. The display of the slogans like that one was part of the routine the grocer had been doing for years: one of those little things that one does in order to secure a relatively quiet and peaceful life in a totalitarian (or a post-totalitarian, in this case) regime. The grocer did not care about the semantic meaning of the slogan and he knew

that those who would buy his carrots and onions would neither care about it. The function of the slogan was to make a sign, addressed to those in authority and to others, who might disrupt his rather peaceful life in case he did not display the slogan. Let us consider some specific features of this action.

Semantic Presuppositions

The single sentence 'Proletarians of the whole world – unite!' of course, has a meaning on its own. In fact, linguists and psycholinguists in the 1970s were busy analysing meaning and presuppositions of such single linguistic units. The sentence would be transformed into a statement and then analysed in terms of truth-conditional semantics (later on even in terms of non-truth conditional semantics, cf. Wilson, 1975). Linguistically, it presupposes that the proletarians of the whole world have not yet united and that the topic centre of the statement is 'proletarians'. Yet, obviously, from the grocer's point of view, it was not the truth-value of the statement that was the reason for the slogan's display.

The Hidden Identity

In one sense, the slogan 'Proletarians of the whole world – unite' pretends to be just as neutral as a word in the dictionary. It is nobody's sentence, it flows in time and space on its own without an author. It is typed on a poster as a slogan and without stating explicitly who is committed to its content. It appears to have been disappropriated by the speaker should there be one. Yet, in another sense, the sentence has an author but his identity is hidden. Havel pointed out that while the semantic meaning of the slogan, in this particular context is irrelevant, the action in which it is embedded, nevertheless expresses meaning, though different from its semantic meaning. It functions as a sign that could have been clearly spelled out as follows: 'I the grocer XY, I am here and I know what I should do; I behave in a way that is expected of me; I am reliable and cannot be blamed; I am obedient and I have a right to live peacefully'. Thus, while it is non-communicative with respect to its semantic meaning, as an action, i.e. as a gesture of obedience, it is clearly communicative. In this particular case, the sentence 'Proletarians of the whole world – unite', expresses a particular ideology.

'The Bororo are arara'.

In his paper on social representations and pragmatic communication Moscovici (1994) analyses the sentence 'The Bororo are arara' by which Levy-Bruhl

illustrates his vision of mystical participation of Bororo individuals in various spheres of life.

> [this sentence] utters the Bororo individual's creed: at one and the same time he is both himself, a man, and something different from himself, a bird (Moscovici, 1994, p. 163).

Moscovici points out that the communication power of this sentence which, with a minimum of semantic material transmits a number of representations, emotions and poetry, goes far beyond semantic meaning. Its intense communicative power lies in its capacity to express rich images filled with mythical narratives which are shared by the Bororo and which represent their social reality. These images are framed within particular speech genres which are likely to be transmitted from generation to generation. In his theory of the evolutionary development of the mind Donald (1991) argues that in tribal societies, language had an integrative role in the context of mythic invention and in the formation and maintenance of people's representations of their social world.

One can conclude therefore, that the communication power of both, 'The proletarians of the whole world – unite!' and 'The Bororo are arara' goes beyond their semantic meaning. Yet, there is a considerable difference between these two sentences in the kinds of social meanings they transmit in their particular contexts. There are also differences in their implications for people's activities because the former expresses an ideology and the latter expresses a social representation. However, if one considers these sentences in vacuo, i.e. on their own, one cannot recognize whether they express an ideology, a social representation or something else. In order to identify their social meaning, one has to address the question as to what kind of commitment the individuals, who express that sentence, actually make: whether they authenticate that sentence or not. Thus, the grocer in the above example, appeared not to authenticate the slogan 'Proletarians of the whole world – unite'. As Havel points out, such inauthenticated expressions are no more than an expression of ideology. Ideology functions as an alibi for all society, from the grocer with his alleged concern for the unity of the workers of the whole world to those in power who express cliches about serving the working class.

Bakhtin insisted, however, that one cannot, as easily as the grocer appeared to be doing that, denunciate his own responsibility because 'there is no alibi in being' (Bakhtin, 1986a). He maintained that, of course, there are many cases in which we behave as if this were possible. The consequence of such alibistic existence is depriving one's subjectivity of the self/other interdependence, i.e. of authenticity. But it is this denunciation of responsibility that has led to what Central and Eastern European scholars and writers have described as the crisis of identity. Interestingly, Bakhtin called a person who tries to live with an alibi a 'samozvanec'. As is known from the Russian history of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries at the time of Boris Godunov, one 'samozvanec' was the

'false Dimitri'. 'Samozvanecs' also appeared in Dostoyevsky's work. However, as Morson and Emerson (1990) point out, in Bakhtin's vocabulary a 'samozvanec' is not someone who pretends that he is someone else but who tries to live in no particular place, or in an abstract place or who tries to ritualize (see later) their lives, such as political or religious figures.

Speech Genres

It is a fundamental characteristic of ordinary language that it expresses a variety of human activities, of speech games and of underlying socio-cultural representations. Some of these characteristics have become relatively stabilised, culturally and intersubjectively shared and Bakhtin (1986b) defined them as speech genres. Their diversity is an essential feature of folk logic and of common sense. They are part of the colourful spectrum of life. In contrast, ideologies, in particular those in totalitarian (and post-totalitarian) regimes, tend to eliminate the diversity of language genres and substitute them with one dominant genre. Such a destruction of ordinary language and the creation of a language of clichés and non-communication was one of the concerns of the dissident movement in Central and Eastern Europe. Havel (1992) maintains, a post-totalitarian system, in order to continue its existence, requires uniformity and discipline. It requires the language of non-communication. Monotony can create a language of non-communication and of non-identity. In his analysis, Havel uses the same term as did Bakhtin, that of 'ritual'. The system of communication in totalitarian and post-totalitarian regimes can be described as a system of rules, information and instructions: a set of 'orientation tables' or 'travel information'. Adapted individuals no longer use normal speech in its colourful plurality but they communicate only apparently, as if. This is a recurrent theme in Havel's plays: to be politically successful depends on uttering the right phrases at the right time. The consequence is that people talk to each other only apparently: they say words but they say nothing: but 'the word that is not guaranteed by a life, loses its significance' (Havel, 1985, p. 359).

One of the main messages in Havel's plays was that the language of non-communication leads to a loss of moral principles and of identity. Thus, the main hero of *The Garden Party*, Hugo, having lost the ability to use ordinary language, in the end did not recognise himself and neither was he recognised by his family. In *Memorandum*, the use of ordinary language was forbidden and was replaced by an artificial language of non-communication and of non-identity. In this way, the capacity of language to express the spectrum of speech genres disappeared and was substituted by a single genre of colourless monotony.

Modern Individualism and Authenticity

The rise of European individualism in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries and its reflexion in the use of language has been captured by Trilling (1972) in his analysis of the literature. He shows that the growth of awareness with respect to 'sincerity' and 'insincerity' and the preoccupation with these terms in the literature had something to do with the growth of personhood (the word 'sincerity' became part of the English dictionary in the sixteenth century while the French were already sincerely in the thirteenth century!). Originally, 'sincere' referred to things and only later to persons. In current developmental psychology the difference between what is sincere and insincere have been shown to be important features of the concepts of the self and of the identity. This includes, for example, role playing, understanding the difference between reality and appearance, the use of different speech genres and the ability to hide, through the use of language, what one does not want to reveal. All these language games can take place because the individual develops the ability to see him- or herself through the eyes and language of the other, i.e. the individual is able to author him- or herself.

With respect to authenticity, Trilling (1972) takes it to be an outgrowth of sincerity in modern age. To be deprived of authenticity means not to be able to function as a human being with respect to things that matter. For example, if in a culture, privacy is a value that matters, to be deprived of it would mean living an inauthentic existence. Or if having a job means having human dignity, then being unemployed means living an inauthentic existence. Ontologically, therefore, authenticity expresses a complementary self/other relationship which presupposes recognition of the self by others and vice versa. In modern culture, however, this complementary self/other relationship has been distorted. Its distortion came not only from phenomena such as totalitarianism but also from what Tocqueville (1945) coined as 'self despotism' when he analysed threats to democracy in America. According to him, it is not a direct force that is a threat to democracy but apparent choices that those in power offer to fragmented and lonely individuals of the modern era who have been deprived of communities and thus, of authentic self/other relationship. As a result, in order to secure a relatively comfortable life and petty pleasures, these modern strangers, all equal and alike, deprived of traditional communities that had held people together, are prepared to give up their identity for some trivial rewards. Moreover, Tocqueville argued, for such fragmented individuals, only their immediate social environment matters and constitutes the whole of mankind.

A complementary picture of individualism presents Taylor (1991) in his analysis of modern culture. He claims that the many-faceted movement are all concerned with 'subjectivation'. Individuals' self-definition has a narcissistic form and it takes place in opposition to the demands of society, solidarity or nature. Referring to modern forms of the self, Taylor borrows Bloom's term 'flattened

and narrowed'. This means that the modern identity suppresses issues that matter and is preoccupied, instead, with trivialities (Taylor, 1991, p. 40).

This moral position of modernity emphasises fragmentation: individuals search for self-fulfilment in pursuing their entitlements. As a result, they are often unaware of concerns that transcend them as individuals, and are unable or unwilling to see complementary societal perspectives. In support of his analysis, Taylor (1992) discusses fragmented and polarized rival campaigns run by specialist groups. For example, abortionists support rights of the mother while anti-abortionists rights of the fetus. Donahue (1990) has written of 'rights mania' and the severance of rights from responsibilities, viewing this as a twentieth-century phenomenon. Etzoni (1991) has maintained that the balancing of individual rights with social responsibilities is an essential requirement for a civil society and for democracy.

'Soft despotism' and 'subjectivation' are also reflected in the use of language and in the attempts to change meanings of words. 'Soft despotism' and 'authenticity as self-expression' with respect to language have become daily features of the mass media. The audience is presented, more and more often with demands for compensations and with accusations of the basis of language use. Recently, in the UK, a school paid £30,000 to a previous pupil who left the school some years ago and who now accused the school of bullying him when he was a pupil there. He may or may not have been bullied. The case however, was presented in such a manner that the school was fearful of being involved in a court case.

In the last two decades or so, there have been an increasing number of attempts in the UK and elsewhere to substitute stigma-words referring to minority groups, physical and mental disabilities, by alternative, non-stigma words. I think that without exception, the chosen non-stigma words have a much broader meaning potential than the rejected stigma words. For example, the term 'mental handicap' that was used in the UK until recently to identify people with intellectual disability was substituted by more general terms 'learning difficulties' or 'learning disabilities'. While 'mental handicap' identified relatively accurately the disability involved, 'learning difficulty' or 'learning disability' refer to all kinds of 'learning problems'. One can say without exaggeration that everybody has one or other learning difficulty or disability. Since 'learning difficulty' or 'learning disability' do not diagnose the disability concerned accurately, one has to use the context, whether linguistic or otherwise, to co-construct the proper referent, perhaps by guessing. In other words, one has to play a guessing game. A similar problem presents an ambiguous term 'challenging' in the sense of 'challenging behaviour' and other 'challenging' physical and mental states. On the same topic, The Scottish Society for Spastics has recently renamed itself as Capability. The belief that one can change social representations by changing words is widespread although there is little evidence that it is effective. However, this is an old Goffmanian theme and I am not arguing against the change of labels.

Another, yet slightly different issue that has arisen during the last two decades is that of sexual harrassment, racism, discrimination and bullying through the use of language. Social scientists have been preoccupied to demonstrate, linguistically and psychologically, how these phenomena manifest themselves and how they are hidden in the use of language. Most of the interest has been to draw attention to prejudice, to discrimination of minority groups and to stigma (e.g. Graumann and Wintermantel, 1989). Yet, I doubt that one can, simply by analysing text, identify what is and what is not discrimination. Bearing into consideration what has been discussed in this paper about ideology and social representations, one cannot arrive at meanings simply through the analysis of decontextualised text. Since language expresses both cultural collectivity and its enactment in discourse, how can one distinguish, in many cases, between sexual harassment and bullying on the one hand and jokes and teasing on the other from the text only?

My point is that 'political correctness' and pressure of some self-advocacy groups with respect to the use of language is an example of 'soft despotism' in our time. Once language is used for ideological purposes, whatever they are, aren't we approaching the situation described by Tocqueville? Is it the case that yielding to such pressures in dialogue and conversation we convert to a kind of apparent speech described earlier, to performances of expected rituals, to substitution of appearances for reality and to adhering to the rules of the game? All these examples of conformity tend to narrow down the multitude of language genres and substitute them by one ideological genre.

One can decide whether, in conversation and dialogue, one wants or does not want to be sincere. Both sincerity or insincerity may, whether in positive or in a negative sense, enhance the self. For example, as Machiavelli has already shown, one has to understand others in order to manipulate them. However, it is when one conforms because of fear, and when this becomes a matter of habit, that authenticity is at stake.

Ivana Marková
Department of Psychology
University of Stirling
Stirling FK9 4LA, UK

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