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War of the Words: The Impact of Language in the Quest for Colonization and Liberation

Brittany Kosir

“Exterminate all the brutes!”

-Joseph Conrad, *Heart of Darkness*

Joseph Conrad's short story, *Heart of Darkness* (1899), is loosely based on Conrad's own experience travelling to the Belgian Congo in 1890. Marlow, the narrator and main character, exemplifies many of the hopes, fears, and experiences that Conrad himself possessed on his journey. As an European, Marlow has one idea of colonialism that he soon finds out is very different from the reality that he witnesses when he arrives. He quickly learns that Western civilization has destroyed civilization in Africa, when he believed they would accomplish the opposite. In addition to Marlow being wrapped under a veil of European ideology, Marlow also demonstrates the *language* of colonialism. In other words, he uses terminology that as a European, he has been taught to use to describe the “other.” Throughout the story, words such as “savage,” “brute,” and “nigger” are used upwards of ten times to describe the African people that Marlow sees. Marlow describes them as “ugly,” “unearthly,” “monstrous,” and always “grunting” or “howling” (p. 1916). However, the few Africans that Marlow works with on his ship are different because they have “restraint,” i.e. he believes they are somehow able to keep their savageness under control (p. 1920). For instance, the fireman on the ship (who shovels coal into the boilers) is described as “an improved specimen” because of his ability to follow orders (p. 1916). Thus what frightens Marlow the most is the “suspicion of their not being inhuman” (p. 1916). Although Marlow believes the Africans to be animalistic and sub-human, he is scared that perhaps they are *not* these things; perhaps they are human after all.

The language that Marlow uses toward the Africans on his journey is dehumanizing. It constructs the African “other” as primitive, corrupt, immoral, and loathsome. Although Marlow may not be aware of his use of this language at first, he certainly becomes aware of it when he

reads the final line of the pamphlet that he found belonging to his fellow European, Kurtz, which reads “exterminate all the brutes!” (p. 1927). Reading these instructions finally awakens Marlow to the horrors that he has been experiencing but was not fully aware of until now. He realizes the meaning of the language being used: to “exterminate” is to fully eradicate, the way we want to completely destroy cockroaches or other types of pests. This language is not just the language of this story, but the true language of colonialism and it does not go unnoticed by Frantz Fanon in his two texts, *Black Skin, White Masks* (1952) and *The Wretched of the Earth* (1963).

In *Black Skin, White Masks* and *The Wretched of the Earth*, Fanon addresses the phenomenon of colonial violence. The first addresses the psychological violence experienced by the subordinate group and the second addresses the physical violence. It is clear that Fanon believes that it is not possible for colonization or decolonization to exist without some form of violence. As exemplified in *Heart of Darkness*, language is a powerful weapon. Language is a significant instrument of social control used by colonizers in order to construct ideologies, divide society into hierarchical groups, and dominate, oppress, and exploit the colonized peoples. Even still, the colonized can also use language to liberate themselves and reclaim their true identities which can be achieved through political education of the masses and non-violent negotiation and compromise.

The Language of Othering

When Marlow describes the African people as “savage,” “monstrous,” etc., he is “othering” them. What he is subconsciously trying to do is construct the other in such a way as to make him (“it” might be even more appropriate in this sense) appear as far removed from himself as possible. For if the white European represents a “true human being,” then anything else must be constructed as less human. In his essay, “The significance of skin colour in human

relations” (1967), Kenneth Gergen explores how these categories of people are created. Citing Charles Osgood, he suggests that just like the colours in paintings or poetry, skin colours carry “certain connotative meanings” (p. 391). These meanings “are evaluative in nature” and thus create a hierarchy ranging from good to bad, pleasant to unpleasant (p. 391). How can these evaluative tendencies be explained?

Sigmund Freud asserts that from a psychological perspective, the pleasure instinct is first satisfied with one’s own body (p. 392). For the infant, he/she must find fulfillment in his/herself before being able to find this fulfillment in other people. When this does finally happen, the infant feels most comfortable with those similar to him/herself (i.e. mother, father). Thus, as an adult, the individual “would be attracted to those people who most resembled some aspect of his own being” (p. 392). It then makes sense that since those who are *like us* make us comfortable, that we would want to be around these people as opposed to people who are different and therefore could potentially make us uncomfortable. This notion also seems to reveal a certain primordialism surrounding skin colour, that is, it would seem that we are born being comfortable with people of our own “kind.”

Gordon Allport suggests that “visible differences imply underlying differences” (pp. 392-3). For instance, children are taught the differences between objects in the form of categories, i.e. what is edible and non-edible, safe and dangerous, good and bad, etc. These differences are eventually used to categorize people as well. This suggests that differences among people can also be taught and learned. However, Allport clarifies that what is different is not necessarily bad; it is simply strange or unknown. Still, the typical reaction to something that is unfamiliar is aversion because what is unfamiliar is unpredictable and therefore potentially threatening (p. 393).

These three theories show that before we even take a person's skin colour into consideration, we already have an underlying psychological reason for liking certain types of people over others. However, once skin colour comes into play, we tend to categorize people and use their skin colour to connote certain characteristics about that person. In "When black first became worth less" (1993), Anton Allahaar suggests that one root of this is the colour symbolism of Christianity (Christianity being the dominant religion of the Western world). Essentially, the notion of colour symbolism suggests that every colour represents a certain trait or is associated with a certain state or emotion. For example, Christian colour symbolism associates white with purity, innocence, goodness, etc. while black is associated with gloom, despair, sin, etc. Why is this? Christians believe in the myth of Creationism, which refers to the idea that "all human beings are created from God and descended from Adam and Eve" (p. 45). However, this creation story does not explain the variety of skin colours in the world, so in order to explain this, Christians look to the Bible. Essentially, Christians use language in the form of myth to explain the differences between people today. They look to the story of Noah's son, Ham, who was punished by God for his disobedience and whose punishment was either that all of Ham's descendants would be black or would be slaves, depending on the representation one is reading (p. 46). Thus today, Christians insist on the "claim that blacks were evil, cursed by God, and fully deserving of punishment (enslavement) for their reported sins and misdeeds in biblical times" (p. 46). Hence the "other" is portrayed in negative terms, but also seen to be deserving of their inferior position. Fanon also takes up this claim arguing that, "for colonialism, [Africa] was a den of savages, infested with superstitions and fanaticism, destined to be despised, cursed by God, a land of cannibals, a land of 'niggers'" (WE, p. 150). The negative, animalistic imagery is evident and predominant in this statement.

Fanon argues that the problem with colour symbolism is that *both* whites and blacks accept its claims. This language is internalized by blacks who come to view themselves as deserving of their inferior treatment. Hence this language is used as justification for any inequality because the oppressed group agrees with it. This notion can be explained using Antonio Gramsci's concept of "hegemony," which explains how the dominant group manipulates the values, beliefs, mores, etc. in society to further their interests and thus dominate society because the other groups accept these views as the norm as well. So when white-dominated Western society asserts that white equals good and black equals bad, they construct themselves to be in a position of power while at the same time, declaring that other groups in society are inferior.

Thus from a functionalist perspective, language is used as a tool to establish a hierarchy among groups of people in society and thus maintain the status quo. For Fanon, this notion is incredibly important because he realizes that "there is an extraordinary power in the possession of language" (BSWM, p. 2). Since the message of colour symbolism is internalized by all groups in society, blacks realize that the more they assimilate into Western (white) culture and use Western (white) language, "the whiter [they get] – i.e. the closer [they come] to becoming a true human being" (p. 2). He refers to this as the "epidermalization of this inferiority" (p. xv). Whites are equated with the civilized human, the black man that can speak the white language is the civilized savage, and the black man that cannot speak the white language is viewed as an uncivilized savage. This hierarchy is crucial in race relations. Once again, the language used here is demeaning for those who resemble the "savage." Therefore "it is because the black man belongs to an 'inferior' race that he tries to resemble the superior race" (p. 190). This ideology ends up pitting blacks against each other, in the quest for superiority. They try to make

themselves as white as possible in order to align themselves with that race which they believe to be equal to that of a pure human being. They want to prove that they are human too, not savages. Blacks compare themselves to other blacks and create a hierarchy within their own group in an attempt to enhance their own status and personal worth. This is the meaning behind Fanon's title, *Black Skin, White Masks*, and exemplifies his foremost concern in the book, which is the lack of a true black identity. The identity that blacks have has been constructed for them by white society through the power of language.

Language and Ideology

Ideology is a key aspect of the dominant group asserting and maintaining their power, as illustrated through the concept of hegemony. An ideology can be defined as a set of beliefs or notions that guides behaviour in society. Allahaar and Côté (1998) argue that there are five dimensions of ideology: cognitive, affective, evaluative, programmatic, and social (pp. 2-4). The cognitive aspect refers to the mix of knowledge (which is scientifically proven) and beliefs (which are not) (p. 2). Beliefs "are accepted simply because the believer *wants* to believe them" (p. 2). One relevant example is the ideology of race. Race is an ideology because there is no logical or scientific reason why whites should be superior to blacks, or any other "racial" group, yet we continue to act as if these categories are real; stereotypes, prejudices, discrimination, and racism continue to exist. The affective aspect refers to its connection to emotion and the "passion" that one's belief is the absolute truth (p. 3). The evaluative aspect of ideologies refers to "value judgements" (p. 3). For instance, the ideology of race presents a clear hierarchy which has been discussed, and seeks to maintain the idea that white is superior to all else. The programmatic aspect implies "a call to action," meaning that it is not enough to simply believe in something, but one must demonstrate his/her belief through language as well as actions (p. 3).

For example, someone who is a racist demonstrates this dimension because the language and actions used are guided by the belief in the racial hierarchy. They seek to maintain the status quo, which is that each race has a specific place in the society to which they belong. Finally, ideologies must be social because they must be accepted and acted on by a group of people (p. 4).

As noted, race is an example of an ideology. The process of creating one race as superior and others as inferior is called “racialization” (p. 61). Fanon states that believing in this idea of racialization as true and natural is dangerous. It means that we accept the inequalities in our society as also true and natural, when it is clear that they are not natural, they are constructed to *appear* natural, thus serving the interest of the dominant group. As explained in the account of the dimensions of ideologies, racialization is not simply a belief, it has a programmatic facet as well, meaning we can see its effects in society because of the actions of its believers. The effects of our language and our actions are clearly seen in society, but they are not believed to be constructions; they are believed to be natural. The dominant group likes to believe that blacks live among the lower class because they deserve to be there. Recall the belief that because of their behaviour in biblical times, they were doomed to be slaves in the New World and are doomed to live in the poorer populations today. It is easy to believe that whites had nothing to do with this.

Race, Class, and Marx

As Fanon psychoanalytically examines the story of Mayotte in *Black Skin, White Masks*, he is able to draw a connection between race and class. He states, “one is white, so one is rich, so one is handsome, so one is intelligent” (p. 34). He makes a similar point in *The Wretched of the Earth* saying, “you are rich because you are white, you are white because you are rich” (p. 5).

As with the colour symbolism explored earlier that sets up white and black as a dichotomy resembling what is good versus bad, so too do these statements seem to imply a similar message. It seems as if everything the white man is, the black man is not. This, of course, is not a logical connection, but what is important is that it is *believed* to be. This is how ideologies work. Black and white are constructed as opposites, which is why those who try to breach this dichotomy, such as the black intellectual, face a whole other set of challenges. It is clear that the white man is representative of the upper class while the black man represents the lower class. In a capitalist society, “the White symbolizes capital as the Negro, labor” (BSWM, pp. 111-2). This division of classes is one more way the dominant group maintains their control.

Class relations are perhaps best explained through an analysis of the theories of Karl Marx. Marx viewed class relations as “a function of property ownership” (Allahar and Côté, p. 29). He divided European capitalist society into owners of property (the bourgeoisie) and non-owners (the proletariat). These are not the only two classes (there are other subdivisions), but the important point to remember is that the proletariat far outnumber the bourgeoisie. What was important for Marx was the interaction between these two classes, for “classes only exist *in relation to* other classes” (p. 29). He saw capitalism as negative for society because of the exploitation and alienation that the proletariat experienced, thus he believed the ideal society would be a socialist, and therefore classless, society. However, he saw class and the state to be intrinsically connected, so he “felt that the only way to abolish class and class privilege was to abolish the private ownership of property” because those who own private property benefit off the work provided by those who do not own private property (p. 30). This elimination of the class system, Marx hoped, would be brought about through a revolution of the proletariat once they came to realize they were being exploited by the bourgeoisie.

Following in the footsteps of Marx, Fanon has hopes for a revolution in the Third World.

He believes that

The choice of a socialist regime, of a regime entirely devoted to the people, based on the principle that man is the most precious asset, will allow us to progress faster in greater harmony, consequently ruling out the possibility of a caricature of society where a privileged few hold the reins of political and economic power without a thought for the nation as a whole (WE, p. 56).

In this sense, Marx and Fanon agree that a socialist society would be the ideal form of society. As Allahar points out, “there is no doubt that Fanon saw himself as a Marxist,” and they did indeed have many similarities (2003, p. 47). However, one of their major differences stems from the fact that Marx was writing about the Western world while Fanon was writing about the colonized Third World, and this leads to crucial differences in their theories, mainly about “which class holds the future in its hands” (p. 47).

It is clear that for Marx, as briefly mentioned, the class with revolutionary abilities is the European proletariat, the working class which makes up the majority of society. Marx states that “of all the classes that stand face to face with the bourgeoisie today the proletariat alone is a really revolutionary class” (Marx in Allahar, p. 48). Consequently, Marx did not really think anything of the peasants, saying that they “are not revolutionary but conservative” (Marx in Allahar, p. 48). To contrast this, Fanon argues the opposite, stating that the revolutionary force in the Third World are the peasants because here, they are the majority. He argues that in the Third World, the urban proletariat are “a tiny section of the population which represents barely more than one percent” (WE, p. 64). This proletariat in fact benefits from the colonial regime; Fanon goes so far as to say that they are “pampered” by it (p. 64). On the other hand, the peasantry is the class that is “underprivileged and starving” and “exploited” in the Third World (p. 23). Taking the term from Marx, he refers to this group of people as the “lumpenproletariat.” This

group is the lowest of the low, the “scum” as Marx called them and the “wretched” as Fanon saw them, hence the title of *The Wretched of the Earth*. This group includes the “unemployable drunks, drug addicts, ruthless pimps, diseased prostitutes, violent murderers and the like, whose passions revolve around their vices” (Allahar, 2003, p. 51). For Marx, this group was not capable of revolution because “they will work for far less: a quick drug fix, a few dollars, even a bottle of rum” (p. 51). Although Fanon argues that “the lumpenproletariat... constitutes one of the most spontaneously and radically revolutionary forces of a colonized people” (WE, p. 81), Allahar charges that Fanon is confused by the use of this term, for he clumps together the peasants and social outcasts under one heading, even though they each have different political capabilities. For this reason, Allahar argues that Fanon has a “non-analytical understanding of class” (p. 52).

Figuring out Fanon

Fanon’s major argument in *The Wretched of the Earth* is that “the colonized man liberates himself in and through violence” (p. 44). He argues that for those living under colonialism, violence is all they have ever known, so it is the only way they will be able to fight back and free themselves. He pushes for this argument throughout the text. Yet Fanon ends up contradicting himself at various points. First of all, Fanon himself asks,

What in fact constitutes this violence? As we have seen, the colonized masses intuitively believe that their liberation must be achieved and can only be achieved by force. What aberration of the mind drives these famished, enfeebled men lacking technology and organizational resources to think that only violence can liberate them faced with the occupier’s military and economic might? How can they hope to triumph? (WE, p. 33).

It almost seems as if Fanon has little faith in the class that he believes has the most revolutionary potential. He does not seem confident that they can win a revolution even if they are able to start one. What this quote also suggests is that Fanon does not actually believe that violence is the

only means of liberation. He appears to believe that there are other options, and these options he hints at throughout his text, beneath the talk of violent revolution.

The first of these possibilities is through political education of the masses. Fanon argues that “the political education of the masses is now recognized as an historical necessity” (p. 88). Through the use of language, the population can be educated so that they can become aware of their position in society and how possibly to overcome it. “The nation should not be an affair run by a big boss,” but rather should include the masses in a way that they have never been included before (p. 127). Fanon explains that the term “leader” comes from the English verb “to lead,” which in French translates to “to drive” (p. 127). Yet we do not need a “driver of the people” anymore now that people are capable of leading themselves. He makes it fairly clear that for the lumpenproletariat in Third World countries, their lives have basically been run for them. As previously mentioned, even their identities are constructed by the white Europeans, and their circumstances have left them with few choices in life. It is important that we “elevate the people, expand their minds, equip them, differentiate them, *humanize* them” (p. 137, emphasis added). This choice of word is important for as we have seen, the majority of people in Third World countries are considered to be “sub-human.” They are neglected because their opinions do not matter, they are mistreated because they are the “other,” and they are disadvantaged because the dominant groups have made them this way. Fanon argues that it is time to change this, but the people must take some responsibility for themselves – they must be the ones responsible for their own change.

Although it is not the focus of his argument, Fanon really stresses the importance of political education arguing that “everything finally rests on educating the masses” (p. 138). Yet

simply educating them is not enough, they must be given the tools needed for liberation and be taught how to use them as well. He explains that

Political education means opening up the mind, awakening the mind, and introducing it to the world. ... It means driving home to the masses that everything depends on them, that if we stagnate the fault is theirs, and that if we progress, they too are responsible, that there is no demiurge, no illustrious man taking responsibility for everything, but that the demiurge is the people and the magic lies in their hands and their hands alone (p. 138).

At this point, we get the sense that Fanon has a little more faith in the lumpenproletariat. He has faith that if they are educated properly, then they will have the tools they need for liberation from the colonizer's reign, for as he mentions, everything depends on them. Since the proletariat and the bourgeoisie benefit from the structure of colonialism, there is no reason to expect any revolutionary actions to come from them. They live "pampered" lives as they profit off the labour that the peasants provide for them. For this reason, it is crucial that the lumpenproletariat realize this and that they take the necessary steps themselves. As Fanon explains, "the more the people understand, the more vigilant they become, the more they realize in fact that everything depends on them and that their salvation lies in their solidarity, in recognizing their interests and identifying their enemies" (p. 133). They must come together and fight for one cause, in the same way that Marx hopes the European proletariat will do. Yet the lumpenproletariat of the Third World has more at stake. For the European proletariat, they can move up or down in the social ranks, but for the Third World lumpenproletariat, they have nowhere to go but up. They cannot get any lower than where they are now. They must realize that they have nothing to lose by coming together and fighting for their freedom. This is the point of political education: to raise awareness of their situation and to give them the tools they need to improve it.

As this essay has been attempting to argue, language plays an important role in this issue. It is clear that in underdeveloped countries, the colonized people are held under a sort of spell

created by the colonizers. The ideologies of white/black, good/bad, etc. are taken seriously and it keeps the colonized from having revolutionary thoughts because they believe that they deserve to be in the class to which they currently belong. As argued, language is used to maintain the status quo and it is able to do so because the language used is deceptive. A government that wishes to control its population will use obscure, confusing, and difficult language that its uneducated audience will not understand or be able to rationally critique, but “a government which declares its intent to politicize the people expresses its desire to govern with the people and for the people” (p. 124).

Fanon emphasizes the fact that a government does not need to use this complicated language to govern a population. It is a deliberate strategy on behalf of the dominant group. Fanon clearly states that “you can explain anything to the people provided you really want them to understand” (p. 131). This is very telling of the type of governance we have in our world today. If the government uses academic, technical, sophisticated language, then it is clear that they do not want the people to be involved in the running of the country. However, using simple, plain, everyday language that all people from all walks of life can understand shows the government’s interest in working *with* the people as opposed to simply controlling them. Fanon argues that when the people are included in the politics, the decision making of a country, “they are a driving force” because they know they are working with their government as a team for the best interest of the society as a whole (p. 131). When the government and the masses work together, there is no deception, no one left out of the process. Language can be used in a positive way to bring the people of a society together for the common good.

In addition, Fanon argues that instead of liberation through violence, the lumpenproletariat can liberate itself from the colonizer’s rule through “nonviolence” (p. 23). By

nonviolence, he refers to “an attempt to settle the colonial problem around the negotiating table before the irreparable is done, before any bloodshed or regrettable act is committed” (p. 23). Fanon believes that it will be the colonized intellectual and the colonial bourgeoisie that would be the ones doing the negotiating, but if the whole society were politically educated, as is the ideal, then anyone in society could potentially be capable of achieving this. Even mentioning this possibility of nonviolent negotiation undercuts Fanon’s thesis that violence is the only means of liberation, even if he does not have all the details figured out. He notes that coming to a compromise is complicated because it requires the cooperation of both the colonizer and the colonized (p. 24). Ideally, if that first stage of politically educating the masses is accomplished, the colonizer would be able to realize that the colonized can no longer be manipulated, dominated, controlled, or exploited so easily anymore. Perhaps they would realize the human potential of this population, that they are not “sub-human” as their European ideologies have taught them. Perhaps they would come to realize that the colonized are equally capable of using language to stand up for themselves and fight back. We know that this type of non-violent liberation is possible. We have seen it happen throughout history with one major example being through the Statute of Westminster in 1931 which granted independence to Canada and other British colonies through negotiation rather than civil war (although it is true that this example was not complicated by race). Peaceful methods of compromise are absolutely possible, providing that both parties are willing to attempt them. This is the major problem – we have come up with some solutions, but it is up to the people themselves to act on them and change their future for themselves. No one else can do this for them.

Conclusion

The transition from colonialism to independence will never be easy; there will always be a struggle. Yet the struggle does not have to culminate in violence, as Fanon seems to believe. Although his clear argument is that violence is the key to liberation in the Third World, there are tinges of doubt scattered throughout *The Wretched of the Earth* that violence is the only option. Language plays a crucial role in this matter. We are taught all our lives that white equals good and black equals bad. We have taken this idea out of its original context and used it to describe people as well. Ideologies such as this one serve as a form of social control, but we do not question them because we believe them to be true. Language allows the dominant group to construct negative views of subordinate groups and “otherize” them, but Fanon believes that the biggest problem with this is that subordinate groups believe these social constructions too and thus learn to hate themselves and their own people, trying to distance themselves at every chance they get. The dominant group also uses language to deceive and confuse the masses, which keeps the masses out of the political realm. However, using language in a positive way to politically educate the masses and to teach them the skills required to negotiate for their interests would be incredibly beneficial for them. This idea of using language to educate the masses and to negotiate to achieve a compromise is not perfect, but at least it is another option. Violence does not have to be the key to liberation as Fanon insists.

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