OLIVE Weekend
The Power of Language
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What is a ‘mother’ in ‘the mother of all bombs’?

• http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-europe-39830311
Who is ‘you’?
Interpellation: the way we are being spoken to, ‘hailed’; we respond because we are always already in language; we think we are being addressed; we think that the message concerns ‘me’.

Because you’re worth it.
Making meaning: The Signifier and the Signified
Meaning: denotation/connotation

- E.g. ‘red’ > denotation: colour
- **Denotation**: ‘red’ = a hue of the long-wave end of the visible spectrum, evoked in the human observer by radiant energy with wavelengths of approximately 630 to 750 nanometers
- **Connotation**: blood, alert, Communism, passion, period, etc;
- There is potential for multiple signification, accessible because we are able to access a store of situated social knowledge.
- We always see and interpret *from a particular cultural point of view at a specific time and place*.
- Never neutral, though it ‘appears’ to be.
Language in psychoanalysis: ‘it’ speaks = the unconscious

• We exist in language – but not only the language we ‘command’ (or think we command.

• Repression: censorship, defence and compromise;
• ‘It’ speaks = the unconscious speaks, but one has to know how to listen;
• Ways of express something un-said (traumatic) or un-sayable or un-said.
Dreams: Manifest and latent content

- Dreams have ‘manifest’ and ‘latent’ content
- **Manifest** = the dream as recalled by the dreamer
- **Latent** = the repressed wishes trying to find expression in the dream
- Freud held that the latent (true) content can only be made known through psychoanalysis (free association) and interpretation
- “The process by which the change from the latent to the manifest content is executed I name the *dream-work*.”
- “In contrast with this is the *work of analysis*, which produces the reverse transformation.”
Dream Interpretation

1. Displacement
Feelings about a situation are not expressed directly but are associated in the dream with something different.

2. Condensation
Two or more images combine to form a composite image

3. Representation
   - An image of something previously perceived
   - Poetic language and rhetoric devices

4. Symbolisation
One thing that represents another
Language, context and power

- Where does one speak from? (We are usually aware of differences in status, order, social occasion etc).
- Who does one speak to? How do we address the other?
- We modulate our speech in accordance with our interlocutor and addressee and the occasion (e.g. different cultures have different norms of politeness, requests, hedging, invitation, etc).
- We position others (interlocutor/addressee) in our speech; we give them a place; at the same time we have an Other (ideal order; principles; values) in mind to whom we always also address our speech.
Example: how a vulnerable man speaks about himself and others.

• Roger: 58, unemployed, male, living in high crime estate; fears crime; spends much of his time hanging over his gate, watching local comings and goings; claims to know all local kids; easily startled by noises; doesn’t sleep well; knows the area well but would avoid the park after dark.

• In order to understand his fear of crime: need to take a closer look into language, how he positions himself vis a vis the researcher and how he represents himself in his own speech.

• He harks back to a past with no violence: ‘today they don’t use glasses, knives and everything, don’t they….Now when you pick up paper or read news or owt – every time there’s a fight, somebody’s been knifed or summat…’ (Holloway & Jeffers 2000: 17).

• What used to keep violence in check, in his view, was patriarchal authority: ‘when I were a kid – only brought up rough and ready, but daren’t do owt wrong... tha’d’ ave got – well, tha’d’ ave got pasted – got a right hammering’ (ibid).
Language and power: calling a girl a ‘slut’.

- Language is not ‘objective’ or ‘innocent’;
- We speak from certain positions of power;
- We are spoken from certain positions of power;
- In language we construct categories of meaning and representations; we accept, confirm, reinforce or question existing categories and classifications.
- Example: ‘slut’ – what does this word mean in terms of who speaks it and who receives it?
Examples of language and power in gender

Data taken from research on young girls’ formations of identity:

• DE: Cos you said people were looking at you like you were a slut. I wasn’t quite sure what you meant.
• T: Oh it was like there were some rumours going around our area about me and this kid. And like, he spread it – someone spread it all around the mid school. People just looking at me, I couldn’t hack it no more, and like I was...
• DE: You must have been very miserable.
• T: Oh no, not. I was really angry. I just wanted to take my anger out on anybody that came along really. I didn’t come to school for about three days cos I couldn’t face anybody. (Wodak, 2003: 33).

‘Slut’ produces the category it names; and while Tracy can challenge being one, she does not challenge the view that some women are called/named ‘sluts’ (Wodak, 2003: 34).

What happens at that moment? How is language used to differentiate ‘me’ from ‘them’? How can one resist such categories?

Is ‘it does not bother me’ a good answer?
Language, sexuality, power: when a woman says ‘no’, she means ‘no.

• Meaning is related to power and dominant discourses. Sometimes this leads to very risky or dangerous situations.

• Think, for instance, of the following: ‘What does a woman mean when she says ‘no’”; (the issue of sexual consent; cultural stereotypes; words having ‘other’ meaning; false justification of violence).

• Power is everywhere:
  Derogatory comments;
  Verbal violence;
  Language that may enact, instigate, cause, promote violence;
  Coercion (e.g. ‘if you love me you will have sex with me’);

**Approaches to language-power**: Knowing where ‘power’ comes from; and the extend to which this is performed in language.
The violence of words: hate and racist speech

• What does the speaker hope to accomplish by disparaging members of another nation or race, by proclaiming the Jews guilty of all kinds of conspiracies, by declaring homosexuals social misfits or by publicly denouncing women as inferior human beings’ (Salecl 2000: 118).

• Hate speech is so insidious because it is designed to take advantage of the victim’s ‘defenselessness’.

• Hate speech aims to assign a subordinate (inferior) place to the other (person); also to define their own position in regard to the addressee (think of the policeman hailing someone in the street; he demonstrates he has the authority to do so); the racist does not have that authority but acts/speaks as if he does; thus he expresses a desire for recognition. ‘So, when I as a subject am hurt and humiliated by someone’s demeaning remark, I assign, through my very injury, authority to my accuser’ (Salecl, 2000: 121).

• The accuser sees himself as an instrument of the Other (e.g. ‘the values of Western culture’).
Injurious speech (Judith Butler)

• When we claim to have been injured by language, what kind of claim do we make?

• We ascribe an agency to language, a power to injure, and position ourselves as the objects of its injurious trajectory. We claim that language acts, and acts against us, and the claim we make is a further instance of language, one which seeks to arrest the force of the prior instance. Thus, we exercise the force of language even as we seek to counter its force, caught up in a bind that no act of censorship can undo. Could language injure us, if we were not, in some sense, linguistic beings? Beings which require language in order to be? If we are formed in language, then that formative power precedes and conditions any decision we might make about it, insulting us from the start, as it were by its prior power.

• The insult, however, assumes its specific proportion in time. To be called a name is one of the first forms of linguistic injury that one learns. But not all name calling is injurious. Being called a name is also one of the conditions by which a subject is constituted in language; (…)
In this sense, it is not enough to find the appropriate context for the speech act in question, in order to know how best to judge its effects. The speech situation is thus not a simple sort of context, one that might be defined easily by spatial and temporal boundaries. To be injured by speech is to suffer a loss of context, that is, not to know where you are. Indeed, it may be that what is unanticipated about the injurious speech act is what constitutes its injury, the sense of putting its addressee out of control. [...] To be addressed injuriously is not only to be open for an unknown future, but not to know the time and place of injury, and to suffer the disorientation of one’s situation as the effect of such speech. (...)