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Word Power in Ideological Context

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Author
Marenin, Otwin

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WORD POWER IN AN IDEOLOGICAL CONTEXT:
THE LIMITS OF NEUTRALIZATION

by

Otwin Marenin

Words are power. They can 'change' reality; they can mystify; they can degrade. Words have been used for all these purposes by the dominant, and *Ufahamu*'s call in its recent editions that "Africa calls herself what she wishes to be called and *not* what alien people would want to call her," and asking for contributions "on possible alternative terms and redefinitions of these"[1] recognizes and reacts to this process of domination through language.

Two aspects of the problem need to be kept analytically distinct. One, that current terms in use by aliens are derogatory in nature of African realities, unscientific and inaccurate, and racist inspired. The article by Fluer-Cobban et al[2] amply documents the misuse of one term - tribe. Second, there is the issue of who is to propose new terms and who is to accept them on whose behalf. The first is a question of neutralizing words, or making them objective and accurate; the second is an issue of power, a question of ideologizing words, if you want, so that what they mean will reflect the interests and needs of the definers and the groups for whom they define.

The two issues are by no means identical, though they overlap; and I will argue that the solution to the first is not a solution to the second issue but that concentrating on substituting for offending words those which please is a superficial enterprise which does not deal with the root causes of the problem (and may even obscure these), nor is it a solution at the level of language itself. To make the argument a few questions need to be analyzed. One, what are the objections to certain words? Two, what makes these words powerful and powerfully offensive (clearly there are many words proposed and extant which do not achieve the effect of demeaning the object, though that may be the aim)? Three, what are the solutions?

Let us deal with the objections. There is, first, the criticism that power to define words lies with certain groups only who through their control of the means of communications have the power to define reality. Secondly, that the new terms used do not have a referent or a corresponding reality. Thirdly, that the words used are vague, imprecise, inaccurate, un-

scientific and that "there is no scientific basis for the con-
tinued use of"[3] them. Fourthly, that the terms used are degrad
ing and demeaning, racist, used to make groups feel inferior.
Fifthly, that the words are ideological, used to mystify realit
and people. Mafeje's argument against tribalism as ideology is
an example of this objection, as in Fluer-Cobban et al's long
section on the relationship of tribe to colonial rule and ra-
cism in modern society.[4] The last argument means more than tha
words are vague or imprecise or derogatory, but that they em-
phasize a particular aspect of reality while neglecting the mor
relevant and urgent distinctions. This last criticism is relat-
ed to the first one mentioned but is more encompassing since
even non-definers will grow to use the mystifying ideology; and
this applies to the oppressor and the oppressed.

Each of these critiques implies a corresponding solution
The first that power to define shift to another group or groups.
The third that the terms used be made clearly definable, accurat
and precise in their descriptive and analytical implications.
The fourth that the terms be made neutral, made to say nothing
beyond their denotations. The second and fifth that the inter-
ests served by certain phrases be exposed and words devised
which will expose the true objective reality thereby serving
new interests, namely those of the dominated. The first solu-
tion goes beyond the level of language itself and deals with the
social, economic and political controls of the processes of
communication. The last four are more restricted in their
prescriptions and can, even in an overall situation where con-
trol rests with others, find expression as long as that control
is not total (which it never is). Journals such as *Ufahamu*
are living examples.

It is easy enough to fail to distinguish the problems
pointed to by these critiques and to arrive at solutions which
are misleading and ineffective. Fluer-Cobban et al's article,
and *Ufahamu*'s call for new terms, are vivid examples. Fluer-
Coban et al object to the word tribe since it has been used to
establish or reinforce a superior-inferior relationship, and
present at great length the "long history of contempt, oppres-
sion, insult and degradation" in the etymological development
of the word and how it has been used by scholars, politicians
and journalists to this effect. The superior-inferior distinc-
tion was artificially created to maintain the exploitative
conditions of colonialism, and was also an expression of the
underlying racism that they feel is associated with the modern
world, and the particular form of economic organization which
characterizes the Western variant. They conclude that it is
"shameful" that a now obsolete term born "in colonialism and
nurtured in racism is still used uncritically in scientific and
popular literature," and propose as remedy the "simple substi-

tution of the terms; "culture," "ethnic group," "society," or "people," all of which carry a similar social scientific meaning without the colonialist and racist referent.[5] What they want are clean, objective, comparative words. Nothing wrong with that wish.

What I do quarrel with is their "simple substitution" solution and what it is likely to achieve. It is almost totally irrelevant to the problem they have raised and is devoid of the "socio-political analysis" they promised in the title.

We need to ask what makes words powerful ideologically (not what makes them offensive - all words can be offensive to somebody but only some acquire the social standing which makes them ideological *and* offensive) and what is their role in maintaining a situation of inferiority-superiority, in creating the consciousness that allows the dominant the luxuries of their oppression and shackles the dominated to the idea in their minds. It should be clear that what Fluer-Cobban et al object to is not so much the word itself but more the use of the word and the social context in which it is used. It is also clear that they think there is a corresponding reality in which cultural values matter in the interactions of groups, for the call for a new label acknowledges the reality but wants it named differently.[6] What is less clear is whether descriptive impreciseness is a major concern for them since the terms they advocate are quite arguably more imprecise. People, culture, society certainly do not carry a "similar social scientific meaning."[7] Their argument, then, is mainly with the derogatory and ideological nature of the word tribe and the way in which it has been used to justify exploitation. This power of words cannot be disassociated from the power relations of the groups involved, and it is this neglect which makes their proposed solution irrelevant.

Power is a relationship between groups; and the power of words lies either with those who control their meanings, or in the words themselves, or in the acceptance, for whatever reasons, by the dominated of the imposed characterizations. The crucial aspect of word power is that they are a part of an ideology creating in the oppressor and the oppressed a consciousness which does not challenge existing objective conditions. The power is not in the words themselves. Words change perceptions and consciousness, and only in the long run may this, and this is a big if, contribute to a change in objective conditions. In themselves words are nothing and it is only their social context which gives them meaning and power. There, also, are no neutral words. Every word can accumulate connotations which demean and mystify. There are no terms which will solve the misuse of language, or the existence of oppression through language. What is acceptable now was inflammatory yesterday and will be reactionary tomorrow. There, also, are no scientifically objective

words. To pursue words is chasing the tail of the snake when the head should be chopped.

Let me illustrate. Fluer-Cobban et al think that "eth nic group" is a better word than "tribe". A quick look at the etymology of the term shows this to be a highly suspect proposition. The phrase is as value-laden as "tribe" - it merely has not yet been in use long enough to attract opprobrium. Th word comes from the Greek *ethnos* - meaning heathen or pagan, and refers to "nations not Christian or Jewish,"[8] or "belongir to or deriving from cultural, racial, religious or linguistic traditions of a people or country, especially a primitive one: *ethnic dances*."[9] It is related to ethnocentrism, the belief in the superiority of one's own group over others or the incli nation to interpret the values or customs of other groups in terms of one's own. It carries a quite derogatory meaning "especially in the American context in which it became popula- rized, referring to those groups opposed to integrative effort and liberal government programs, especially racist, uneducated and unassimilated elements." Only recently has it "become le- gitimate to be an ethnic."[10] (Ethnics are the ones who burn the buses.) Lastly, "exactly what is meant by ethnic group is something that scholars have seldom found easy to describe."[11] Far from being neutral, accurate or precise it is none of that It is an American term and its use in other parts of the world would simply be another aspect of the cultural imperialism Fluer-Cobban et al object to.

To react to words is a passive, a washer-woman strateg which leaves it up to the definers to set the terms and the reformers to clean up. It plays into the hands of the users - for suppose "tribe" were to be eliminated from use today, "eth group" would do quite nicely and vast opportunities for new coinings would open up: ethnicalism, groupism, etc. all carryi subtle nuances in meaning and contempt. The recommendations Fluer-Cobban et al make ask us to change words in the hope tha the users may be transformed; yet if the new word is blunt it will be quickly honed into a cutting edge by rhetoric and use as long as the will to do so exists. They seem to think that the use of other words will somehow change things. It will merely make them feel more comfortable. They want nice words, neutral words when the need is for powerful words. Their argu ment accepts a never-ending process and as long as they do the dominant will be able to manipulate the process. They address the wrong audience and advocate a game by rules others have se on a field not of their choosing.

But having said this much is not having said a great deal about a solution. In a sense it is obvious that words follow power. The question is what can words do before power relations change or what can they do to influence such change?

To realize that language is superstructure yields no strategy
on the level of language. It would, at best, be difficult to
get the dominant to accept new words which reveal their inte-
rests, for the argument made against certain words implies
that these words are there for a purpose, that they are useful
in protecting the interests of some and so to ask for diffe-
rent words means asking for something against the interests of
the powerful. If such demands were to succeed that in itself
would show that the struggle has been won. Or that the inte-
rests which were protected are now protected in other ways
and the acceptance of neutral words is merely symbolic.

To move from bad to good words will not do much. This
is not to belittle the sentiments behind the demand for change,
nor to imply that others are unaware of the relations between
social power and word power and what is ultimate, but to argue
that words chosen are still the choice of the dominant, in this
case claiming to speak for the oppressed. The more important
problem is to analyze the process of language change and how
it can be made effective in an ideological sense. The first
point is that the dominated must be the definers of the terms
which fit them. The second, and this centers on the level of
language, is that rather than searching for neutral terms the
search should be for the most offensive ones.

The evolution of what to call Africans in America, in
the USA, is a case in point. The shifts from Colored to Negro
to Afro-American were carried out for the exact reasons and
purposes which Fluer-Cobban et al now support. They, one
would guess, would have opted for the word Afro-American. But
these were words chosen for the dominated, and they were
euphemisms. To continue the example, Black which has become
the accepted term, though at one time it was highly derogatory,
was chosen from the needs and perspectives of the minority.
It proved effective, much more so than the other terms in
changing consciousness, because it was a term meant to offend
and therefore confronted, when used, the majority with one visi-
ble distinction which the other terms, in the interest of a
harmony which benefitted the majority, euphemistacally tried
to avoid. Using Black forced the majority into acknowledging
the past and the existing inequalities more effectively than
the other terms because it proclaimed that Blacks as a group,
because of their skin, becuase they were black, had been the
victims of the system. And once the term became self-conscious-
ly used by Blacks it ceased to have the power to oppress and
degrade. (Chicano has a similar history; and history is replete
with examples of groups which adopted the most derogatory
name levelled against them as a means to defuse its intent and
achieve cohesion.) The power of words will be broken when the
dominated reject the meanings implied by the dominators, and

nothing does it as effectively as accepting the worst, most
derogatory word. The message sent would be simple: "We are
oppressed; there are no nice words for this; the words you m
wish to demean us do not work anymore; find another one if y
wish." The rules of the game would be reversed. The domina
would create and not react.

Words do make a difference, but only when they are
ideologized. Running away from derogatory words solves noth
What would work might be called the guerilla strategy - to u
the limited resources available to take over the land and pl
one's own meanings. To affirm tribe, primitive, or jungle a
relevant terms but to impose different meanings. Let primit
mean social cooperation; let tribe be community; let traditi
mean wisdom; or witchcraft be medicine. The call *Ufahamu* ma
should not have been for new words but for redefinitions of
existing derogatory ones. New words will only prettify.
Derogatory words might lead to changes in consciousness.

Footnotes

1. *Ufahamu*, vol VII, no. 1, 1976, inside back cover. Or se
   the articles by Thomas O'Toole and Daniel Shafer, "Clea
   ing the Jungle out of African Studies," *African Studies
   Review*, XVII, 1, (April 1974); or Evelyn Jones Rich,
   "Mind Your Language," *Africa Report*, (September-October
   1974).

2. Fluer-Cobban et al, "'Tribe':A Socio-Political Analysis,
   Ufahamu, vol.vii, no. 1, 1976.

3. *ibid.*, p.161.

4. Mafeje, Archie. "Ideology of Tribalism," *Journal of
   Modern African Studies*, 9, (August 1971); Fluer-Cobban e
   al, op. cit.

5. Fluer-Cobban et al, "'Tribe':...," p.148, 161.

6. Fluer-Cobban et al's alternatives have been cited. Mafe
   thinks that the words tribe and tribalism are "legitimat
   if "restricted to specific forms of economic, social and
   political organizations that can be fixed in time and
   space." He would prefer the phrase "regional particular
   and "class formation" as more appropriate for current
   African realities. ("Ideology...., p.258, 261)

7. A.L. Kroeber, for example, discerns approximately 200 different definitions of the word culture. More, I am sure, could be added since he wrote *The Nature of Culture*, Chicago University Press, 1952.

8. *Oxford English Dictionary*, Clarendon Press, 1933; and *Supplement to Oxford English Dictionary*, Clarendon Press, 1972.

9. *Random House Dictionary of the English Language*, Random House, 1973.

10. *Encyclopedia Britannica, Macropedia*, Vol. 18, 92B.

11. Morris, H.S. "Ethnic Group," *International Encyclopedia of the Social Sciences*, Vol. 12, 260. Similar analysis could be made of the other terms. e.g., 'people' has its roots in the Latin word *plebs* - the non-nobility, the rabble.

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Otwin Marenin is a senior lecturer in the Department of Political Science at the Ahmadu Bello University, Zaria.