A project at the University of Huddersfield is bridging the gap between linguistics and the study and resolution of conflict. **Lesley Jeffries** explains how language can be used to create or solve conflicts.

Language, ideology and conflict in the modern world

I suppose it is unsurprising that, as a linguist, I think that language is the most important aspect of human society, functioning both as the cement for relationships and as the (metaphorical) ammunition in conflicts, short of actual violence. There are obvious ways in which language participates in conflict – and its resolution/ transformation. These include, for example, raising your voice; swearing; interrupting; lying; making mischief (e.g. telling tales on people); not allowing others the floor and many other features of impoliteness which are researched by many scholars in pragmatics. These aspects of language are often labelled 'interpersonal' (the terminology comes from the work of the linguist M. A. K. Halliday) and they clearly relate to the ways in which language use constructs relationships (both good and bad) between people.

My focus here is not on the interpersonal aspects of language use, but on the ways in which language itself produces meanings, which can be labelled 'ideational' to contrast with the interpersonal meanings.

The kinds of meaning that are produced by texts under the ideational heading are those which create a particular view of the world and can thus be ideologically important as they feed into the communications between people, including between the parties in conflicts.

Of course, explicit ideological meanings can be produced clearly and unequivocally by the basic system of the language, as in the following sentence from the British National Party's website:
We want Britain to remain – or return to – the way it has traditionally been.

Ignoring the fact that this sentence doesn't seem quite clear about what kind of Britain it is seeking (remain or return to), we can see that there is no equivocation here about what is wanted. The explicit nature of this kind of ideological message makes it relatively easy for readers to either accept or reject the values of tradition and nationalism that are presented here. The main proposition of the sentence is carried by the main verb 'want' which tells the reader that this is the opinion of the BNP who produced the text. What is wanted is that Britain should remain (or return to) some kind of 'traditional' state. There are, of course, many questions raised by the notion of 'tradition'. How far back are the BNP prepared to go, for example? Accepting that there probably is, in fact, some kind of consensus amongst their supporters about what is a 'traditional' view of Britain (the 1950s?), we can see that the sentence does not hide this ideology, but states it directly.

More difficult to argue with are those ideologies that are more implicit in a text, as in the following extract from the same page of the BNP's site:
All these facts point inexorably to the overwhelming and extinguishing of Britain and British identity under a tsunami of immigration.

Whilst it is still clear that there is a racist agenda in this sentence, nevertheless, the proposition of the sentence itself does not present this ideology up front. The proposition is that X (these facts) points to Y (from 'the' to 'immigration'). Neither 'these facts' nor the 'tsunami of immigration' are being presented for scrutiny. Instead, they are 'packaged up' as noun phrases which, because they are 'definite' noun phrases, are presupposed to exist. Existential presupposition is a mechanism of the English language which allows us to communicate about existing things in the world around us and saves us having to re-introduce shared information each time we speak to each other. Thus, if I was talking to friends about my daughter, they would probably already know that I had one, and I could therefore use a definite noun phrase (my daughter) to refer to her. The alternative would be that each time we refer to something, we'd have to re-introduce it (I have a daughter and she…).

This very useful and common device of presupposing something's (or somebody's) existence, however, also works predictively. If I am talking to someone who doesn't know me or my family, I can still use the phrase 'my daughter' and they will rightly presuppose that I have a daughter. So far, so good, but the same mechanism can also make us likely to accept the existence of things or people defined by the speaker in ways that we have no control over.

If I said 'my unkind daughter', hearers would not be in a position to decide whether my view of her unkindness was one they wanted to agree with. Instead, they would have to accept my view of the world, in which my daughter is unkind (she's not, in fact!).

So, if we take this principle (designated as 'naming' in the field of 'Critical Stylistics') a little further, anything that is 'packaged up' into a definite noun phrase will cause the reader to presuppose that the referent of the noun phrase exists. This means that the example from the BNP website we saw above presupposes that both 'All these facts' and 'the overwhelming and extinguishing of Britain and British identity under a tsunami of immigration' exist. The fact that educated and critical readers are often quick to spot (and reject) such assumptions when they turn up should not blind us to the fact that in the process of reading texts, all of us are obliged to construct what linguists sometimes call a 'text world' – the representation of a text that we envisage in our mind – simply in order to process the text at all. In producing the text world in our minds, we inevitably construct, for the time being, a world in which all the presuppositions are true, even if they do not concur with our own personal ideology or political outlook. The step from this to actually changing our world view will vary, but repetition of the same presuppositions time and again could be part of that process.

So, if texts 'name' the world in certain ways and as readers we are (temporarily) obliged to accept their nomenclature, then what else do texts do?

Language in conflict

The framework of Critical Stylistics suggests that the following are the core ways in which texts produce their conceptual 'worlds':

Naming – labelling things and people in the world of the text.

Representing processes, actions, states – choosing how to present dynamic processes.

Contrasting and equating – showing which things in the world of the text are to be seen as synonymous or oppositional.

Enumerating and exemplifying – listing either to show all the members of a category or to illustrate the members of a category.

Assuming and implying – presupposing or implying that the world is a certain way.

Negating – denying or refusing that certain things are true in the world of the text.

Hypothesising – imagining, hoping or predicting that certain things are true of the world of the text.

Prioritising – making some features of the conceptual landscape more structurally prominent than others.

Representing others' speech, thought and writing– choosing how to present the words of others and whether to stay close to verbatim representation or to paraphrase/summarise etc.

Constructing space and time – constructing a conceptual version of the physical world with dimensions of time and space fitting that view of the world.

We have seen that naming can cause the reader (or listener – this works for speech and writing) to accept the 'reification' (making into a thing) of certain concepts. Just one more of these textual-conceptual processes will be explored here to illustrate why they are important in human affairs, not least in creating the ideologies underlying conflict, whether at the neighbourhood or international level.

Constrasting – or constructing opposites – is another activity performed by texts in representing the world-view of the producer. There are a range of textual 'triggers' that can produce opposites which, unlike hot-cold or alive-dead, are not conventional. For example, a structure which includes 'X, not Y' will almost certainly be producing (temporarily at least) a constrasting pair of words or phrases for that particular context:

It was snowing, not raining.
It is a caravan, not a campervan.
You are intelligent, not weird.

In these (invented) examples, the world of the text is constrained so that there are only two types of precipitation (snow and rain) or only two kinds of leisure vehicle (caravan and campervan) or only two kinds of intellectual quality (intelligent and weird). In most cases, this is no more than convenient for the purposes of the conversation taking place. However, the mutually exclusive nature of the opposites produced by this frame (X, not Y) means that the production of opposites by this and other similar means leads to the creation of conceptual worlds which only allow the reader/listener to line up with one or other of the terms in the opposition. Thus, when President Bush reacted to the events of September 11th, 2009, with "Either you are with us, or you are with the terrorists", he constructed the unconventional (at that time) opposition between the US and its supporters and everyone else, who he deemed to be supporting the terrorists. This statement did, of course, produce cries of outrage from those in Western countries who saw problems with the foreign policies of the US and the UK but who would not want to be labelled terrorists for simply being critical of the Western powers. But Bush's binary opposite was repeated and repeated in news commentary and political campaigning both in the US and in Europe – and though many argued against this binary, it has become almost naturalised as the foundation of the world's new division into muslim and non-muslim halves. When I was growing up it was the West versus Eastern bloc (i.e. communist) countries and we were taught to fear the 'other' – and be loyal to our own country – through this binary opposition.

Mutually exclusive opposition, known as 'complementarity' by linguists, is not the only kind of linguistic (or logical) opposite – but it is the default opposite that human beings tend to assume. There are gradable opposites (hot … cold) and converse opposites (borrow … lend) as well. Gradable opposites have intermediate values between the extremes which are sometimes also lexicalised (warm … cool). Converses are opposites that are mutually dependent, rather than mutually exclusive. So, if someone is buying, there must be someone selling too. They are two perspectives on the same transaction or situation.

Perhaps it is overly idealistic to hope that this knowledge about how texts can naturalise new opposites as

mutually exclusive could inform the playing out of conflict at all levels, from the domestic to the international. Whilst he is yet to achieve anything substantial in resolving the region's conflict, President Obama's visit to Israel as I write has addressed the problem in a way that seems at least to appreciate these subtle differences. The Guardian's report of his speech included the following:

The only good future for both peoples, President Obama said, had to include an independent Palestinian state alongside Israel.

Thus, this report shows Obama as effectively claiming that the Israel/Palestine opposition has to be re-viewed, not as a complementary opposite where only one side can win the argument but as a necessarily converse opposition where the future security of each is dependent on the future security of the other. However, other reports of the same visit emphasise different facets of the US president's message to Israel. The Jewish Chronicle in London, reports his visit in the following way:

The US President is not interested in the National Service law or school reform. He would love to go down in history as the man who brought peace to Israelis and Palestinians. Realistically, he prefers not to be remembered as the president who jeopardised the historic alliance between the two countries.

One of the definite noun phrases (the historic alliance between the two countries), which is presupposed to exist, refers to an alliance not between Israel and Palestine, since Palestine is not a recognised country in this text, but between Israel and the US This passage constructs an opposite in the second and third sentences

using another opposite 'trigger', parallel structures:

These sentences, then, have the same subject (he), equivalent verbs (go down in history and be remembered), though the second one is negated, and an equivalent

He	would love to go down in history	as	the man who brought
he	prefers not to be remembered	as	the president who jeopardised

opening to the final noun phrase (the man who, the president who) albeit at different social levels. The stage is therefore set by the text for the final part of the sentences, which will be presumed to be in opposition to each other:

Peace to Israelis and Palestinians
The historic alliance between the two countries

These juxtaposed sentences, then, do not seem to allow for the US and Israel to continue their 'historic alliance' if Obama is also to bring peace between the Israelis and Palestinians. This becomes a logical impossibility in the conceptual world of the text. Whilst this may not be the conscious intention of the author of this text, the logic of the opposition is hard to escape. It is therefore a counsel of despair.

Since conflicts are widely played out using language, both in people's private lives and in the official negotiations between parties to conflict, the need for participants to be made aware of the potential for textual meaning to contribute unhelpfully – or positively – to the process must surely be one of the aims of those working to make a difference to human suffering arising from conflict. ¶

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President Bush reacted to the events of September 11th, 2009 with a binary opposite. See page 12.

Find out more

Books
Politeness: Some Universals in Language Usage by Penelope Brown and Stephen C. Levinson (Cambridge University Press, 1987)

Critical Stylistics: The power of English by Lesley Jeffries (Palgrave Macmillan, 2009)

Online
Visit the University of Huddersfield's Language in Conflict website, a web platform aimed at bridging the gap between linguistics and the study and resolution of conflict: **www.languageinconflict.org**

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