

Domestication of Language

Ivan Illich on Verbal Abuse

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a review of

Shadow Work, Ivan Illich. Marion Boyers, Boston and London, 1981

“As progress and technology transform our way of life and our physical surroundings,” Lynne Clive writes [“Newspeak and the Impoverishment of Language,” FE #315, Winter, 1984], “they eat away at our language, enfeeble our spirit...” I would like to expand on this idea by making use of Ivan Illich’s insights discussed in his book *Shadow Work*, on language as one of the earliest areas of previous human competence—a cultural commons and focal point of shared meaning—to come under attack from church and state, and later from advancing technology and bureaucratic institutionalization. Illich argues that by undermining the “vernacular” domain in language, technics, and other areas of human activity, these forces of authority destroy self-sufficiency and freedom, making us all wards of the state and the disabling professional institutions.

The vernacular is commonly understood to signify local, unschooled, colloquial language, but Illich attempts to restore it to its former, fuller meaning. -“We need a simple adjective,” he explains, “to name those acts of competence, lust, or concern that we want to defend from measurement or manipulation from Chicago Boys and Socialist Commissars. The terms must be broad enough to fit the preparation of food and the shaping of language, childbirth and recreation,” but must be clearly distinguished from unpaid labor and hobbies which represent the “shadow work,” that other side of industrial labor, in modern society.

Domain Conquered by Pedagogues

In Rome the term was employed up until about 600 A.D. “to designate any value that was homebred, homemade, derived from the commons.” Such a term was “opposed to what was obtained in formal exchange,” and represented a culture based on “sustenance derived from reciprocity patterns embedded in every aspect of life, as distinguished from sustenance that comes from exchange or from vertical distribution.”

Illich contrasts such a vernacular society with contemporary commodity-intensive society, which shatters these reciprocity patterns and modes of self-sufficient subsistence and mutual aid, replacing them with wage work and its twin, unpaid shadow work (such as housework, education, even hustling). Equally, it breaks up household and community economies with market economics, undermines autonomy and independence with dependence, medicalization and welfare; and replaces self-created, reciprocally generated language and knowledge with the professionally mediated language and information of the schoolroom, government office, data bank, and mass media. *Shadow Work* actually treats several aspects of this process, though I will limit myself here to its treatment of language in particular.

What originally drew me to Illich's book in 1982 was his treatment of the Andalusian Renaissance humanist Antonio de Nebrija, author of the first grammar in Spanish, and in fact in any Romance Language (1492). I had been reading about the history and evolution of the Spanish language, and a friend recommended Illich's book for its lucid treatment of language as a domain conquered by pedagogues, just as the New World was being conquered by adventurers and missionaries.

As Illich suggests, there is a fascinating parallel between Nebrija and his contemporary, Columbus. Both petition the Queen of Spain to embark on projects of exploration and conquest—Columbus arguing for geographic expansion, Nebrija for a cultural and linguistic expansion. She resists both, finally consenting to the dream of the navigator (for such conquest was understandable to a monarch of that time) and rejecting that of the scholar (for such a conquest was not yet understandable to authority but would soon become so).

Illich observes, "Columbus proposes only to use the recently created caravels to the limit of their range for the expansion of the Queen's power in what would become New Spain," whereas "Nebrija is more basic—he argues the use of his grammar for the expansion of the Queen's power in a totally new sphere: state control over the kind of sustenance on which people may draw every day." This opening salvo in the state's war against subsistence values—replacing the vernacular with taught "mother tongue," an invention of clerics and pedagogues in the service of church and state—represents "the first invented part of universal education."

In his introduction to his *Gramatica castellana* (Castilian Grammar), which is also his petition to Queen Isabella and which Illich analyzes in detail, Nebrija reveals his consciously political and imperial outlook. He wishes to create a new society and empire over the fragmenting vernacular society and the territories to be conquered, since he intuitively, with the conquest (in 1492) of Granada, the last Moorish kingdom on the Iberian peninsula, that Spain is on the threshold of empire—hence anticipating the conquests of the New World even before Columbus set eyes on its shores.

Nebrija's linguistic authoritarianism was marked early. He even left Spain for Italy as a youth not only because he was drawn to the new ambiance to be found there but because he detested the linguistic anarchy of his homeland and the lack of Latin spoken there. His biographer, Felix Olmedo, wrote that upon his return in 1470, "he saw himself as coming to battle against barbarism."

Nebrija returned to Spain in the process of national organization and Renaissance.

The first steps of geographic expansion and exploration, the spread of humanism, and the growth of commerce all reflected a general phenomenon of social dynamism and growth.

The consolidation of national, centralized power was well underway, with the unification of Aragon and Castile (by the marriage of Ferdinand and Isabella), the establishment of the Inquisition, the conquest of Granada and expulsion of thousands of Jews and Muslims, and the ecclesiastic reorganization. Many privileges and forms of authority previously belonging to the nobility, the military orders, the municipalities and the cortes were being incorporated by the Crown, which hacked up its power throughout the peninsula with the organization of a national police, the Santa Hermandad, or "Sacred Brotherhood."

Nebrija's notion of regulated national language is timely, then, though his notion of the intimate relationship between language and empire is not original. Alfonso the Wise (1221–84) had already had such an outlook, bringing together Hebrew, Arabic and Latin scholars to translate works of Classical Antiquity and the *fueros* or Iberian laws into Castilian.

Another scholar and contemporary of Nebrija, the Aragonese Gonzalo Garcia, wrote prior to Nebrija that "Language, commonly, more than other things, follows empire...since the word should be like money...which is refused in none of the lands of the Prince who has coined it." This notion of language as an object of commerce in the service of state power, with the standardization necessary for its exchange, is central to the tremendous evolution which the entire European continent undergoes from the late Middle Ages until the emergence of industrial capitalism.

Such a process is seen in every domain of life, reflected for example in the new concept of artistic perspective, in which the symbolic relationship between objects becomes a visual, mathematical function. The graphic representation of movement by the French theologian Nicolas Oresme (c. 1320?-1382) and the description of the four "primary qualities"—size, shape, quantity and motion—by Galilei Galileo (1564–1642) represent other examples of this process of objectification and quantification.

The appearance of clock time in the Benedictine monasteries, the standardization of currencies, weights and measures, and the emergence of a money economy long precede industrialization; in fact they prepare the ground for industrial capitalism's pillaging of subsistence cultures and forms of traditional social reproduction. This entire progression leads to a total deformation of experience, founded upon instrumental rationality, technical and professional hierarchy, and stratified power—the pillars of modern civilization.

Nebrija's desire to instrumentalize and regulate language is part and parcel of this long process. Previously, such grammatical regulation, under the concept of *artificio*, was limited to the teaching of learned languages such as Greek and Latin, and had little influence on most people's lives. As Hispanist and philologist Rafael Lapesa has remarked, "It was a novelty to apply it to spoken language, since it was believed that, learned from the lips of one's mother, practice and good sense sufficed in order to speak it properly." By applying such rules to Castilian, Nebrija created a language model, an artificial, reified construction, which would later come to be institutionalized and imposed. The difference between freely spoken discourse and his technique is comparable to the difference between a bowl of fruit and a painted still life.

Nebrija's intent is absolutely political: to forge a pact between the sword and the book, as Illich says, "a pact...of sword and expertise, encompassing the engine of conquest abroad and a system of scientific control of diversity within the kingdom." He reminds the Queen that language has always accompanied empire, referring to Rome. In answer to her lack of understanding as to the usefulness of a grammar for a tongue everyone speaks without the help of experts, he replies:

"Soon Your Majesty will have placed her yoke upon many barbarians who speak outlandish tongues. By this, your victory, these people shall stand in a new need; the need for the laws the victor owes to the vanquished, and the need for the language we shall bring with us." Illich comments, "While Columbus sailed for foreign lands to seek the familiar—gold, subjects, nightingales—in Spain Nebrija advocates the reduction of the Queen's subjects to an entirely new type of dependence. He presents her with a new weapon, grammar, to be wielded by a new kind of mercenary, the *letrado*...He offers Isabella a tool to colonize the language spoken by her own subjects; he wants her to replace the people's speech by the imposition of the Queen's *lengua*—her language, her tongue."

Nebrija is cognizant of the significance of what he is proposing: making the regulation of language itself a critical support for the nation state. This new state, Illich continues, "takes from people the words on which they subsist, and transforms them into the standardized language which henceforth they are compelled to use, each one at the level of education that has been institutionally imputed to him. Henceforth, people will have to rely on the language they receive from above, rather than develop a tongue in common with one another." This "radical change from the vernacular to taught language," he concludes, "foreshadows the switch from breast to bottle, from subsistence to welfare, from production for use to production for market..." *

Though Nebrija's proposal was not understood by the Queen, his methods were employed in the conquests of America, both in the regulation and investigation of the indigenous languages in order to proselytize the faith, and in the teachings of Spanish to the conquered peoples to bring them into the empire and integrate them into the system of power.

But the conquest was also to make its advances in another Manner. Its main project was to suppress that situation in which language, in Nebrija's words, had "been left loose and unruly," thus evolving in a few centuries from Latin to the Romance languages.

Here he is directly attacking vernacular language in all its diversity, creative liberty, extension and autonomy; thus "dialects" don't even rate as legitimate languages and should be suppressed. In his attack on linguistic anarchy, Nebrija ends up the spiritual forefather of Franco, who suppressed and prohibited Catalan, Galician and Basque after the Civil War. Language is rightly seen as a potential realm of freedom; because it defies imposed authority, it isn't language but "barbarism" and must (according to the state) be annihilated. In the continuing bloodbath in the Basque region and the rivalry and resentments present throughout the country over the regional languages, Spain is still living out the consequences of that brutal war of annihilation

Like all totalitarian states of today (and which of them can be described as truly not totalitarian?), Nebrija understood that linguistic authority brings with it social control, and with it, the eclipse of resistance to empire. By subjecting it to the state and its organs of bureaucratic-technological administration, the maintenance of power can be ensured.

Because language is directly linked to social meaning itself, to a people's capacity to define themselves and their world, its instrumentalization undermines this realm of freedom by encoding it into a hierarchy of domination. The human beings subject to it tend to become mere instruments themselves, collaborators in and mouthpieces for their own suppression.

Everyday speech, once a domain of reciprocally created meaning and social cooperation, now becomes, in Illich's words, "the product of design...paid for and delivered like a commodity." And despite the timeworn commonplace of language academics that language cannot degenerate but merely fulfills a changing "need"—from knowing the names of wildflowers and herbs, say, to those of brands of automobiles—a language spoken in an increasingly alienated and administered universe obviously undergoes the same process of corruption and degeneration that its speakers go through. As people become things, their language reflects and conspires with their thingification. The cultural commons becomes polluted by capital; like other domains of human autonomy, speech gets stolen, transformed into a power of manipulation, dependence and conformism.

"Taught mother tongue," Illich says, "has established a radical monopoly over speech." And though the vernacular does not necessarily die, it certainly does wither under the onslaught of a manufactured language utilized to prop up the codes of power and powerlessness. "People who speak taught language imitate the announcer of news, the comedian of gag writers, the instructor following the teacher's manual to explain the textbook, the songster of engineered rhymes, or the ghost-written president." Their language "implicitly lies," is created for spectators. "While the vernacular is engendered in me by the intercourse between complete persons locked in conversation with each other, taught language is syntonic with loudspeakers whose assigned job is gab."

As Illich's arguments suggest, linguistic anarchy is a precondition for social liberation. The instrumentalized and standardized codification of language must be transgressed so that a new matrix of autonomous meaning can be engendered. Such a language can only be forged in a liberatory practice which resists and eventually overthrows the ideological idiom of power and dependency—that suppression of a speech freely given and freely received. As Lautreamont declared, poetry will be made by all.

* A recent FE article ("A Family Quarrel," FE #312, Spring, 1983, Vol. 18 No. 1), mentions in passing the problems in Illich's discussion of human needs, his dependence on such questionable criteria as productivity and counter-productivity for critiquing industrialism. This tends to make "an anti-capitalist efficiency expert" out of Illich, the article notes, and, I might add, contributes to his confusion on technology. In *Toward a History of Needs*, a very worthwhile book, he makes the error of distinguishing between an abstract potentiality for technology and its present uses, blaming its "counter-productivity" on the "radical monopoly" enjoyed by professionals and technocrats, thus falsely separating these social categories from the web of technical-instrumental activities which they incarnate. He ends by defending the "great inventions of the last hundred years, such as new metals, ball bearings, some building materials, electronics," even computers as "in principle...the hardware that could give an entirely new meaning" to freedom. Illich does not explain how such technological development could be controlled, who would decide which building materials would be used. In fact, despite this abstract concept of technology, freedom can never be established or guaranteed by "hardware." For a detailed discussion of this technological confusion, see "A System of Domination: Technology," Winter 1984 FE.

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