



Journalism, ideology and linguistics: The paradox of Chomsky's linguistic legacy and his 'propaganda model'

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Annabelle Lukin

Macquarie University, Australia

Abstract

A central reason why news discourse is an object of academic research is its potential and actual role in establishing and maintaining ideology. News can do this because it is made of language and other semiotic modalities (Hasan, 1996a). This article considers the media coverage of the 2003 'Coalition' invasion of Iraq, in light of the contradictions between the assumptions about discourse in the 'propaganda model' (Herman and Chomsky, 2002[1988]), and the nature of language in the Chomskyan tradition. The propaganda model is predicated on language being social and semiotic, two aspects of language absent in Chomsky's linguistic theory. Paradoxically, linguistic description in the Chomskyan tradition cannot be recruited to analysing the news discourse identified by Chomsky and Herman, over 20 years ago, as the medium for the establishment and reinforcement of deep and consequential ideologies, which are as powerful today as they have ever been.

Keywords

Halliday, Hasan, ideology, propaganda model, Saussure, Whorf

Introduction

The effects on Iraqi people, society and culture of the decision by some western powers to invade Iraq have been unequivocally devastating, and are still unfolding (see e.g. Otterman et al., 2010). The consequences for the invading countries are not commensurate, but are hardly insignificant (see e.g. Stiglitz and Bilmes, 2008). For journalism

Corresponding author:

Annabelle Lukin, Centre for Language in Social Life, Department of Linguistics, Faculty of Human Sciences, Macquarie University, NSW 2109, Australia
Email: annabelle.lukin@mq.edu.au

studies, the invasion of Iraq provides yet one more case study for testing theories of media–state relations. In an empirical sense, the question is: Was the media’s reporting of this monumental event determined or at least shaped by the belligerent governments and/or by those who could profit financially from this invasion? A number of research studies have sought to consider these questions, or near variants of them (e.g. Aday, 2010; Bennett et al., 2007; Boyd-Barrett, 2004, 2009; Lewis et al., 2006; Miller, 2004; Robinson et al., 2009), and there is a general consensus across this literature about the success of the Coalition’s media strategies for shaping media coverage to their own interests. Boyd-Barrett is particularly forceful in putting this position, arguing that journalists have been complicit in supporting the ‘agendas of corporate, political and plutocratic elites’ (2009: 296). The media, he argues ‘provide cover for war fought on false pretexts and at crippling expense’. He criticizes ‘a press cavalry that invariably and unashamedly arrives too late to make the difference that is most desperately needed’ (2009: 298). Boyd-Barrett continues:

Mounted upon white steeds, uniforms pressed, sabers rattling and swords glinting, blackened boots gleaming, the media charge with grand bravura onto a battlefield now littered with corpses and the dying, men, women and children in their hundreds of thousands, millions, whose vain and pitiful cries for help and vengeance have long been extinguished.

Not all scholars are as unequivocal in their criticism of the media coverage of the invasion of Iraq and its aftermath. For instance, Robinson et al. (2009) report that many of their findings are consistent with the predictions of ‘the elite-driven model’, a term they use to encompass theories of media–state relations which position the media as largely deferential to ‘elite perspectives’ (for example, Bennett’s ‘indexing model’, 1990, as well as Herman and Chomsky’s 2002[1988] ‘propaganda model’). But they argue that there is evidence to suggest ‘actual patterns of wartime (sic) media performance in Britain are more nuanced than some might have expected’ (2009: 536). Citing the coverage by Britain’s Channel 4, a state-owned commercially funded broadcaster, they argue that in the face of ‘factors such as patriotism, reliance upon official sources and ideology’ Channel 4 maintained ‘a degree of autonomy and balance that is rarely expected in wartime (again, sic)’ (2009: 540). Lewis et al. (2006) draw similar conclusions. They reject the proposition that ‘media folk’ were ‘mainlining uncut propaganda’ (Miller, 2004: 536), arguing instead that, while the embedding programme was ‘the biggest public relations coup of the war’ ‘many British embeds generally did maintain their objectivity’ (2006: 197, 196).

Part of the difficulty in researching questions about the function of the media and its relations to government and industry is that they are complex and multidimensional. Thus, there is the problem of trying to calibrate even the small sample of research findings listed above, when central premises remain ill defined, implicit or are not shared across the various research endeavours. Robinson et al.’s claims to have found ‘balance and autonomy’ at Channel 4, or Lewis et al.’s suggestion that some British embedded journalists were ‘objective’, are a case of this problem. The terms are treated as self-evident, but the difficulties of operationalizing such terms make them unsuitable for the evaluation of news discourse. And further, what assumptions do the researchers themselves bring about

the events in the news reports which form the data for their research? I have drawn attention above to Robinson et al.'s use of the term 'wartime' to specify the scope of their study, since they assume it is unproblematic to call the events under consideration 'war'. But if so, what made it 'war', rather than, say, 'colonial aggression', as at least some Iraqi officials were calling it? The term 'war' comes with many associations (Lukin, forthcoming a), a function of the fact that words, as Saussure, Whorf, Firth, Halliday, Hasan and other linguists have argued, do not simply refer to things that exist independently of language. Rather, as Halliday has argued, words are 'the product of the intersection of a large number of classificatory dimensions' (1966: 149). 'War' is part of a lexical set, which includes items such as 'combat operations', 'conflict', 'violence' and 'aggression'; it is a category of which there are subtypes: 'conventional war', 'guerrilla war', 'civil war', 'holy war'. This is the barest specification of this lexical item. Thus, the basis for choosing 'war' as a descriptor is not predetermined in the nature of the events themselves. In the introduction to their study of the media management and reporting of the invasion of Iraq (*Media at War: The Iraq Crisis*), Tumber and Palmer try to make explicit their name for the thing that is the focus of their study:

To refer to the 'military phase' of the crisis (20.3.03–1.5.03), this book uses the term 'invasion' on the grounds that it is the least evaluative term available for the process in question, given that calling it 'war', 'the military phase', or 'the combat phase' would not clearly distinguish it from what followed. President Bush's own phrase 'major combat operations' – which he declared were at an end in a speech on 1 May 2003 – is arguably even less evaluative, but is clumsy when repeated. (2004: 1)

The authors have some sense that key terms should be subject to reflection. But none of the lexical choices they explore are more or less evaluative than any of the others. All involve prejudgement, Bush's choice ('major combat operations') as much as the others; and none more precisely delineates the period they refer to than the others. Note too the circularity of their statement, that to refer to the 'military phase' of the war, they will not use the term 'the military phase', an illustration of Saussure's argument that language does not merely express a reality to be found equally by every rational being. Rather, language organizes human experience (Saussure, 1974).

In any environment, language provides speakers with choice, which is the basis of it being a bearer of ideology (Hasan, 1996a). This fact about language is a driving force in studies of media discourse, which assume that linguistic choices in news discourse have consequences for the ways news consumers come to view a certain set of historical conditions. There is a shared recognition that media institutions or corporations are producers of text, and that the consequences of the dissemination and consumption of these texts are forms of consciousness (Bernstein, 1990; Boyd-Barrett and Rantanen, 1998). This is not to suggest that news audiences are mindless consumers. I would agree with Philo's argument that it is crucial to research the 'potential impact of text on public understanding' (2007: 184), a process which requires studies of text reception. But the reason news discourse is consequential is because, as Hasan argues (e.g. 2005, 2009, 2010), texts are purveyors of meanings, and meaning moves the mind. The mind is a function of experience (e.g. Greenfield, 1997). Each individual brain develops 'specific ways of being, doing and saying – a mental disposition toward

recognising aspects of experience as relevant' and 'a large part of the experience of living is the experience of "language-ing"' (Hasan, 2010: 269).

In the unfolding of everyday experience, the social process of 'news' has been interpolated for some considerable time (see e.g. 'News and Empire – the Thought Stream of the Group Mind', Chapter 5 of Mitchell's 2007 *History of News*). News has been an everyday commodity for some centuries (e.g. since the early 18th century in England; Mitchell, 2007: 160). It is part of daily patterns of living, which is why millions of people could watch the 'Coalition' invade Iraq in March 2003 over breakfast, lunch or dinner. The formalization of public relations as an 'industry' in the 20th century (e.g. Cutlip, 1994) was predicted by Lasswell in 1927, but it appears through recorded history that humans have understood that talking and thinking are two sides of the same coin. If everyday discourse is key to shaping and/or changing minds, then the ever-present social process of news must be an important medium in this regard. It is this power of news texts which have made them an object of academic inquiry. Whatever cognitive scientists might claim a priori about the mind, it is its malleability that is central to studies of news discourse.

The propaganda model: 'abuse' but not 'use' of language

A concern with the effects of news discourse motivates the 'propaganda model' of news production, elaborated by Herman and Chomsky (hereafter 'HC') in their 1988 co-authored book. HC argued that 'money and power are able to filter out the news fit to print, marginalize dissent, and allow the government and dominant private interests to get their messages across to the public' (2002[1988]: 2). They proposed five kinds of filters at work: 1) media ownership and profit orientation of major media firms; 2) advertising as the primary source of income; 3) reliance by media on government, business and 'expert' sources provided by 'agents of power'; 4) 'flak' as a means of bringing media into line; and 5) the ideology of anti-communism as a 'national religion and control mechanism'¹ (2002[1988]: 2). Their title, *Manufacturing Consent*, is an echo of the claims by some sociologists about the function of news. Boyd-Barrett and Rantanen argue, in relation to studies of the rise of global news agencies, that the business of these institutions was the production and distribution of forms of consciousness, in ways which significantly impacted 'our understanding of time and of space' (1998: 1). News, they argue, contributed to processes of 'the construction of national identity; to imperialism and the control of colonies' as well as being 'an essential lubricant in day-to-day financial affairs, both within and between domestic markets' (1998: 1–2). In a similar vein, although as part of a larger theory of cultural reproduction, Bernstein (1990) has called media institutions part of the 'field of symbolic control'. The term denotes agencies and agents 'that specialize in discursive codes'. These 'discursive codes, ways of relating, thinking, and feeling specialize and distribute forms of consciousness, social relations, and dispositions' (1990: 134–135).

In HC's account, the media 'manufacture consent' because they 'serve, and propagandize on behalf of, the powerful societal interests that control and finance them'; these powerful interests, thus, 'play a key role in fixing basic principles and the dominant ideologies' (Herman and Chomsky, 2002[1988]: xi); 'the powerful' are able to 'fix

the premises of discourse', and in so doing they "'manage" public opinion' (p. lix). Such forces rule out the possibility of 'mass deliberation and expression' (p. xli); the media 'internalize' 'industry's self-legitimizing usage' (p. xlvi). HC make the case that the media needs to be understood in structural terms. They outline some details of media ownership in the USA, and relate these arrangements to, among other factors, deregulation of media ownership. They argue against conspiracy notions and discount the role of 'crude intervention' in media production processes (e.g. p. xi). They contend their analysis is closer to a 'free market', with 'the results largely the outcome of the workings of market forces' (p. lx). The result, they propose, is a dichotomization, 'as if a commissar had instructed the media' to '[c]oncentrate on the victims of enemy powers and forget about the victims of friends' (p. 31). This dichotomization is 'massive and systematic' (p. 35).

Given the evidence for direct intervention in the production of news (e.g. Rampton and Stauber's 2003 detailed account of the aggressive PR campaign behind the lead up to and invasion of Iraq; *New York Times* journalist David Barstow's investigation into the links between the Defence Department and a network of retired military officers in the pay of defence companies; Boyd-Barrett's 2004 discussion of Judith Miller's reporting at the *New York Times*), the idea that the patterns in news discourse are simply the workings of market forces needs to be challenged. But, for reasons of space, I will not pursue this particular problem with HC's model in this article.² Instead, the question I will ask is this: What must discourse be like if it has the power imputed to it by the propaganda model? While providing tantalizing glimpses into the power of language, this is not a question the authors of *Manufacturing Consent* ask, despite one of them being considered 'the father of modern linguistics' (Clarke, 2003), a scholar considered to have 'generated a revolution in his discipline' (Edgley, 2000: 1), and whose contributions to linguistics are apparently 'epoch-making' (Otero, 2004: 3). Indeed, despite the necessary evidence for the propaganda model being observable effects in news texts, and despite the authors' commitment to the close study of news texts themselves,³ *Manufacturing Consent* does not recruit a linguistic theory or method for its study. The word 'linguistics' appears only once in the whole book, and its location is Chomsky's biodata. While language is undoubtedly the carrier of propaganda in HC's model, their analysis does not recruit a single conceptual tool from the discipline most directly engaged in understanding and describing the nature of language.

I am not alone in wondering what the implications of the propaganda model are for understanding the power of language, and its relationship to notions such as ideology. In an interview titled 'Language and Politics', and reproduced in an extensive collection of interviews with Chomsky by the same name (Otero, 2004), the first question turned to this matter: 'Could you discuss the relationship between language and politics?' (2004: 471). Chomsky's answer was that the relation was 'tenuous' (see also the first interview in Chomsky, 1979). The interviewer persisted, with a more specific question: 'Could you address the notion that words, language, have inherent power, concepts convey meaning beyond their words? What is happening mechanically when certain phrases are used, such as "the free world" or "strategic interests" or "national interests?"' (2004: 472). From the 'father of modern linguistics', these were not matters pertaining to language. He acknowledged that it was typical when people were discussing language and politics to raise these kinds of questions, but dismissed the 'banality' of such terms, calling them

‘vulgar propaganda exercises’, with which ‘we are inundated’ and which many of us ‘internalize’. Chomsky argued that to defend oneself against this propaganda was ‘not very hard to do’. He gave the example of America’s involvement in Vietnam being described as the ‘defense’ of South Vietnam, when America was attacking the South: ‘Here the use of language – really the use of propaganda is what we should call it – ... frames the discussion.’ By such choices, ‘our capacity for thought is destroyed’ and ‘our possibility for meaningful political action is undermined by very effective systems of indoctrination and thought control that involve, as all such systems do, abuse of language’ (2004: 472–473). Propaganda, for Chomsky, was not the ‘use of language’ but the ‘abuse of language’. In this same answer, Chomsky was both arguing that the systems of indoctrination described in *Manufacturing Consent* were very powerful, *and* that it was not too hard to defend oneself against them. When asked what people can do to ‘cut through this elaborate and ornamented framework of propaganda and get at what is real, get at the truth?’ (2004: 478), Chomsky’s response, echoed elsewhere in the book, was: ‘I frankly don’t think that anything more is required than ordinary common sense.’ In a related question in the same interview about how Americans might see through the ideas behind their country’s foreign policy, he answered that minimal exposure to ‘the facts’ and a dose of ‘ordinary common sense’ would suffice (2004: 404–405). The title of this collection of interviews, *Language and Politics*, might reasonably have carried the sub-title ‘and never the twain shall meet’.

For those who have delved into Chomsky’s linguistic descriptions, his dismissal of language as a bearer of ideology is not surprising. In fact, it would be totally unremarkable except for the fact that *Manufacturing Consent* constitutes a minimalist kind of discourse analysis which is predicated on the unspoken assumptions: 1) that language shapes the mind; 2) that language is implicated in the maintenance of power relations in society; 3) that power relations in turn shape media discourse; and 4) that the evidence for this relation is visible within the texts themselves. These kinds of claims suggest that language is social, i.e. for the purpose of human communication, and semiotic, i.e. a resource for meaning making. This position has been argued by linguists in a long tradition which is all but ignored in the hagiography associated with the narrative of the Chomskyan ‘revolution’ in linguistics. Chomsky himself has contributed to the obfuscation of other linguistic traditions. Indeed, because of the:

... narrow experiential base motivating Chomsky’s linguistic methods, and the sweeping claims made on behalf of the promissory note of universal grammar ... a whole era of painstaking fieldwork and inductive inquiry [in linguistics] ... was maligned as empiricist, descriptivist and taxonomic (all terms given new ‘lives’ as negatives in the linguistic forums of key centres in America). (Butt, 2005: 89)

In the place of this kind of fieldwork, Chomsky made intuition about ‘grammaticality’ the key source of linguistic evidence.

Contradictions and lacunae

Manufacturing Consent was published in the fourth decade of Chomsky’s career as a linguist. The unuttered assumptions about language, society and the mind that must have

motivated the authors were up against Chomsky's own well-established views about language as abstract formal structures in the mind, conceived in Cartesian terms.⁴ This is what best explains the paradox between the arguments presented in *Manufacturing Consent* and his rejection of any relationship between language, politics and ideology. The weirdness of the schism can only be appreciated when the assumptions of the propaganda model are put beside Chomsky's linguistic theory. I explore later in the article some of his key ideas by considering *Aspects of the Theory of Syntax*.⁵ The book was published in 1965, and, before turning to its claims about the nature of language and the 'actual subject matter of linguistics' if it is to be 'a serious discipline' (1965: 4), it is useful to contextualize Chomsky's writings on language at that time by considering, albeit superficially, the significance of the year 1965 in modern American history. In 1965, for instance, American troop levels in Vietnam were increased from 23,000 to over 180,000 (Young, 1991: 333), US Secretary for Defense (sic), McNamara, authorized 'ROLLING THUNDER', opening the way for sustained bombing of North Vietnam (1991: 136), and President Johnson defended this escalation in his well-known speech at Johns Hopkins University:

Tonight Americans and Asians are dying for a world where each people may choose its own path to change. This is the principle for which our ancestors fought in the valleys of Pennsylvania. It is the principle for which our sons fight tonight in the jungles of Viet-Nam ...

Historian Marilyn Young also writes of this year:

... the violence of the air war against the South Vietnamese countryside increased once again at the turn of the new year when General Westmoreland received approval for the regular use of B-52 bombers. Originally designed to deliver nuclear bombs, the B-52 flew too high to be heard until the bombs were already falling. A single mission of six B-52s would devastate an area one-half mile wide by three miles long. The *New York Times* reported that the number of armed helicopters had risen from one hundred to three hundred. Ten operations a day were conducted in which a single helicopter might draw fire and then 'radio for armed helicopters and fighter bombers ... with heavy fire-power to blast at the positions of the Viet Cong ...'. World War II bombers known as 'Skyraiders' were reoutfitted for Vietnam, with four 20-millimeter cannon that together fired over 2,000 rounds per minute; under its wings the Skyraider could carry a bombload of 7, 500 pounds. (1991: 132)

How was this aggressive intervention, with its substantial human cost, justified? In answering the question 'How did we get into Vietnam?', Young argues it is necessary to understand the nature of the universe within which the politics of this era played out. She draws attention to the importance of NSC-68, a classified report from the US National Security Council, commissioned in 1950 by President Truman. Young argues that from NSC-68 both political parties derived 'a set of axioms ... as unquestionable as Euclid's'. These axioms included that 'the intentions of the United States are always good', 'the intentions of the enemies of the United States are bad', and that 'Communism ... is fundamentally bad'. She draws attention to the advice of NSC-68 that the United States should essentially feel quite free to adopt any means necessary to frustrate the 'Kremlin design' (1991: 25ff). In the words of the NSC-68:⁶

Our free society, confronted by a threat to its basic values, naturally will take such action, including the use of military force, as may be required to protect those values. The integrity of our system will not be jeopardized by any measures, covert or overt, violent or non-violent, which serve the purposes of frustrating the Kremlin design, nor does the necessity for conducting ourselves so as to affirm our values in actions as well as words forbid such measures, provided only they are appropriately calculated to that end and are not so excessive or misdirected as to make us enemies of the people instead of the evil men who have enslaved them.

In this brief extract, the US government gave itself *carte blanche* not only to pursue its foreign policy objectives by any means necessary, but to maintain the high moral ground while doing so. The extract is but one small window into the kind of discourse, and the extensive range of actualized text, which established the climate necessary to naturalizing an aggressive, interventionist American foreign policy, in the process ensuring that the invasion of Vietnam, and numerous other foreign interventions, would seem as inexorable as the arrival of summer after spring. And one would be entirely mistaken to think the meaning-making work which created this climate was somehow epiphenomenal, as if the real business was the material actions taken, and the semiotic work to validate those actions just ‘vulgar propagandizing’ which came after.

An ideology about the place of one’s nation in the global scheme of things, of which the NSC-68 is instance, is very much a semiotic creation, a densely woven fabric, made out of meanings, and, therefore, out of words-in-structures. In the face of such ideological work, one needs more than mere ‘common sense’. Note for instance the abstract quality of the NSC-68 extract above. I would need a separate article to elucidate the origins of this highly ‘nominalized’ style of discourse, achieved through the deployment of a specifiable set of grammatical choices. One of its features is to recast dynamic human process and agency as static and object-like. Just in this brief passage, we are presented with a world view in which abstract entities (‘our free society’, ‘any measures’) are given the power to act, for instance in the following formulations: ‘Our free society ... will take such action, including the use of military force, as may be required ... etc.’; ‘the integrity of our system will not be jeopardized by any measures, covert or overt, violent or non-violent, which serve the purposes of frustrating the Kremlin design’. One important effect is the absence of identifiable human agency, at the same time that a rhetorical position of ‘necessity to act’ is being established. Note also the construal of a putative higher purpose of such action, via both lexical (‘... serve the purposes of ...’) and grammatical choices (‘as may be required [in order] to protect those values ...’). This dimension of meaning functions to put off to some vague future time the evaluation of an actualized instance of violence, since it is to be deemed in the service of some yet-to-be-realized complex/abstract state of affairs (viz. the ‘freedom’ of Vietnamese/Iraqis as a ‘goal’ of the invasions of both countries). It is one of the most urgent tasks for linguists to provide a coherent, detailed and forensic account of the layers of this powerful ideology, an ideology which creates a universe in which a way of conducting affairs does not seem ideological.

The NSC-68 undoubtedly contributed to the ways in which the American invasion of Vietnam was represented by much of the media, and understood by many Americans, providing a necessary background to the claims made by HC about the reporting of the

'war' in Vietnam. The basis of their argument is a comparison between the received wisdom about Soviet invasions in Europe and of Afghanistan, over which there was 'no serious controversy'. They argue these invasions are 'described as aggression', and that 'Western reporters cover the war [in Afghanistan] from the standpoint of rebels defending their country from foreign attack' (2002[1988]: 176). HC note the contrast with the reporting of Vietnam where 'it was the American invaders who were regarded as the victims of the "aggression" of the Vietnamese' (2002[1988]: 177). The authors argue that 'from the point of view of the media, or "the culture", there is no such event in history as the U.S. attack against South Vietnam and the rest of Indochina'. They continue:

Even at the peak period of peace-movement activism there was virtually no opposition to the war within the intellectual culture on the grounds that aggression is wrong – the grounds universally adopted in the case of the Soviet invasion of Czechoslovakia in 1968 – for a very simple reason: the fact of U.S. aggression was unrecognized. There was much debate during the war over whether the North Vietnamese were guilty of aggression in Vietnam, and ... even the South Vietnamese were condemned for 'internal aggression' ...; but there was *no discussion* of whether the United States was guilty of aggression in its direct attack against South Vietnam, then all of Indochina. (2002[1988]: 184; emphasis in original)

Without disagreeing with the substance of their claims, I note that HC's account here, and elsewhere, relies on grand notions like 'the intellectual culture', 'the mainstream media', 'elite consensus', all of which are expected to be self-explanatory. Also, I note that they provide virtually no empirical evidence for the claim about the way in which the American media differentiated Soviet and American aggression. Elsewhere, they do use empirical evidence, drawing on content analysis as their primary method. Hansen et al. (1988) note of content analysis that it has 'nothing to say on what constitutes a viable unit [of analysis – AL]', with the consequence that mostly those units available to the naked eye (e.g. counts of words, numbers of article, column inches) are the typical measures (Hansen et al., 1998: 96). One problem is the failure to see news texts as texts, e.g. as 'clearly, a structured whole' (Burgelin, 1972: 319 cited in Hansen et al., 1998; and see Lukin forthcoming b). But the unit of text does not enter into the Chomskyan paradigm. Moreover, syntax is considered 'autonomous'; that is, its relationship to meaning is considered peripheral. Therefore, it is not surprising that, as Boyd-Barrett notes, for all its claims about the role of media texts as carriers of propaganda, HC's model 'has little to say about propaganda in the text itself' (2009: 297). For this, Boyd-Barrett writes, 'we depend on rhetoricians, content and textual analysts and on framing theory' (2009). Boyd-Barrett does not include linguistics in this list of approaches for understanding textual patterns, but then the linguist whose 'influence [from the mid-1960s onwards] on academic ideas about language has been unrivalled by any living scholar' (Joseph et al., 2001: 122) fails to see any role for linguistics. Is it a sign of Chomsky's long shadow over linguistics, that my search of the term 'linguistics' in this journal (*Journalism*) returned only 11 hits, even though there seems to be, as one would expect, a strong preoccupation with matters of media representation?⁷ HC do not, because they cannot, entirely ignore the issue of how language is being used towards these ends. But rather than turn to a linguistic account to understand how words-in-structures make meaning, they borrow from Orwell, to claim a simple distinction between 'normal word usage' and 'Orwellian

word usage'. They argue, for instance, that the US intervention in Vietnam would, in 'normal word usage' be called 'aggression' (Herman and Chomsky, 2002[1988]: xxix). Such claims exhaust the authors' attempts to explain how language is involved in propaganda processes.

How to make linguistics irrelevant to the study of news

What kind of theoretical maneuvering is required to see language as something essentially separate from matters of ideology or propaganda? While living through the kind of hubris that underpinned the expansion of American involvement in Vietnam in 1965, Chomsky was busy elaborating his theory of 'universal grammar' in publications such as *Aspects of a Theory of Syntax*. When he might have turned his towering intellect to the problem of how language was being recruited to the promulgation of 'cold war' axioms, he was turning linguistics away from the study of language in process, from the study of real people, in all their diversity, using language in the course of living life. Linguistic theory, Chomsky was arguing, 'is concerned primarily with an ideal speaker-listener, in a completely homogenous speech-community' (1965: 3). If linguistics was to be 'a serious discipline', then 'observed use of language ... surely cannot constitute the actual subject matter of linguistics' (1965: 4). A 'generative grammar' is concerned with 'a system of rules that in some explicit and well-defined way assigns structural descriptions to sentences' (1965: 8), which should allow the analyst to describe 'the intrinsic competence of the idealized native speaker' (1965: 24). In setting out his account of 'the rules' of 'the mental reality underlying behaviour' ('selectional rules', 'categorical rules', 'subcategorization rules'), Chomsky turned linguistics into a species of algebra (see especially Chapter 2 of *Aspects*). By rejecting the actuality of discourse, he was free to invent his own data. Consequently, the year when President Johnson was using the resources of language to recruit support to increase America's military intervention in Vietnam – to convince young Americas to kill and die for a set of values – Chomsky was pondering why 'sincerity frightens the boy' is possible, while 'the boy frightens sincerity' is not; or why it is possible to say 'John solved the problem' but not 'John solved the pipe' (1965). Such questions were considered the essence of linguistic inquiry, providing the route to understanding the structure of the 'Universal Grammar', considered a genetic endowment of the human brain.

My brief account of Chomsky's views is by necessity reductive. But the point remains that one cannot use a Chomskyan paradigm for the analysis of the news discourse which he and Herman identified over 20 years ago as the medium for the establishment and reinforcement of deep and consequential ideologies, which remain as powerful today as they have ever been. The pursuit of an idealized universal grammar in the brain continues, despite the idea being questioned by neuroscientists⁸ and rejected by some typologists (e.g. Evans and Levinson, 2009: 429, who argue that the claims of universal grammar are 'either empirically false, unfalsifiable, or misleading'). The questions dramatized by Chomsky in *Aspects* could only be made relevant and mysterious by making meaning peripheral to language, and making the actuality of linguistic behavior (called 'performance'), and the social conditions of its production, irrelevant to understanding language. As Halliday has argued:

... imaginary problems were created by the whole series of dichotomies that Chomsky introduced, or took over unproblematicized: not only syntax/semantics but also grammar/lexis, language/thought, competence/performance ... Once these dichotomies had been set up, the problem arose of locating and maintaining the boundaries between them. (2003b[1995]: 236)

The only way Chomsky can reconcile his position on language with his interest in the role of the media in producing and circulating ideology is to reject any relationship between language and ideology or propaganda. While Edgely has suggested that Chomsky is being cautious and modest by conceding only 'a loose connection' between his political science work and his work in linguistics (2009: 34), it is neither caution nor modesty on Chomsky's part; it is a zealous belief that language structure is best seen as 'inorganic' matter, and that language 'like most organs' is 'non-functional' and 'not well-designed for use' (Chomsky, 1991, in Otero, 2004: 729). Chomsky's position contrasts with the linguistic tradition which foregrounds meaning-making in human society as the function of language, and, therefore, as the point of departure for any account of linguistic structure and organization.

Ideology as 'configurative rapport'

There is an irreconcilable contradiction between the assumptions about language that underpin *Manufacturing Consent*, and those of its minimalist, feeble accounts of 'word usage'. But I am very much in sympathy with its conclusions, particularly those pertaining to the reporting of the Vietnam War. Indeed, my own research on the reporting by Australia's public broadcaster, the ABC, of the 2003 invasion of Iraq provides empirical evidence for a deep cultural orientation to modes of representing war and violence. In fact, my findings parallel HC's claims that the idea of 'American aggression' was unthinkable (2002[1988]: 186). In my data, it is idea of 'Coalition violence' that is entirely absent. For instance, in a corpus of two weeks of the nightly television news bulletin on the ABC (consisting of over five hours of news, and around 45,000 words, from 20 March 2003 to 3 April 2003), there is not one news report which refers to the invasion and bombing of Iraq as 'violence'. It is not that the word was not used, but it was largely reserved for the description of actions of anti-war protestors. I have examined a number of other news or press briefings corpora from the same period, and got the same result. Like 'American aggression' in Vietnam, 'Coalition violence' in Iraq was unthinkable.

Thus, in the corpora I have examined, 'Coalition' and 'violence' repel each other, like the positive and negative ends of two magnets. This finding is part of a larger suite of lexical collocations and configurations which constitute a part of the texturing of an ideology which enables 'war' to be a hallowed cultural practice, in which men, and increasingly women, of a nation state are involved in 'service' and 'sacrifice', where they 'fight for' a higher purpose and can be entrusted with 'a mission', where their deeds can be mythologized by Hollywood; and much much more. Even when the brutality of 'war' becomes visible to citizens of the belligerent countries (e.g. as in My Lai, or Abu Ghraib), whatever shock or outrage it generates is read against the ideological naturalization and validation of 'war' by many and varied social and cultural processes. It is not immaterial

to this ideology that 'war' is an abstract noun, that its verb form has largely fallen out of usage, that in its verb form it is intransitive, and that it has a meronymic (part-whole) relationship to the actions which constitute it (see Lukin, forthcoming a, for an analysis of the meanings of 'war', and related terms, such as 'violence' and 'aggression', drawing on Saussure, Whorf, Firth, Halliday and Hasan). These features permit the phrase 'going to war' as in 'Today Australia has gone to war', as if the 'war' already existed, rather than being brought into being by the actions of the 'Coalition' countries. 'War' creates a sense of unity, both in its rhetorical power to generate the 'rally around the flag effect' (Mueller, 1973), and in providing an explanation for diverse actions on different scales that must be often chaotic and incoherent. 'War' naturalizes killing, because attacking, bombing, striking and killing are all just part of what 'war' means. The meronymic relation permits the well-worn rhetorical gambit invoked in the face of civilian deaths, to quote the then Australian Prime Minister: 'In any war some civilian casualties are unavoidable' (ABC TV 7.30 Report, 31 March 2003).

I have set out just a few of the linguistic features of an ideological orientation which is unquestionably profoundly powerful. If we take ideology to be 'legitimacy' which authorizes, sustains and reproduces social relations and organizations (from Thompson, 1990, cited in Turner, 2006: 279), then attending to the use of words or phrases here and there in discourse (cf. HC's discussion of the use of the word 'genocide') is no more than a very small beginning of an understanding of an ideology. As Whorf has argued, language is not the 'piling up of lexations' (1956: 81). Language creates world views; to see the constructedness of some world view requires a notion like Whorf's idea of 'configurative rapport', an orchestra of linguistic resources which leads to the 'deep persuasion of a principle behind phenomena' (1956: 81; cf. Hasan's 1996a discussion of the ideology of women's work in the home). The creation and maintenance of ideology requires that it be played out in everyday communal activities. To survive, an ideology must be in the fabric of society, and as such it must recruit the resources of non-verbal semiotic systems (Hasan, 1996a: 145). The consequence is that ideologies become part of everyday living, as natural as the air we breathe. 'War' is validated by many social practices, of which journalism is only one, albeit one able to validate a specific instance of something deemed a member of the category of 'war' at the time of its prosecution.

Chomsky argues that in the face of 'the very effective systems of indoctrination and thought control' all one needs is common sense and a few facts (see above), eschewing any notion that linguistics might provide some expertise for the analysis or deconstruction of an ideology. Ironically, in 1967, Chomsky published an essay on the responsibility of intellectuals in the face of the profligate American (and Australian!) militarism in Vietnam, published in the *New York Review of Books*, arguing that academics had the leisure, facilities, and, notably, 'the training' enabling them to expose 'the truth lying hidden behind the veil of distortion and misrepresentation, ideology and class interest, through which the events of current history are presented to us'. But Chomsky could not have given a linguistic account of the ideology enabling the Vietnam War without abandoning the central tenets of his theory. Compare Chomsky's views here with those of Hasan's, who considers language a 'fearsome resource', through which we do not only the trivial (e.g. greeting,

gossiping, buying a load of bread), but also those ‘enormously momentous things’, such as ‘monopolizing resources, putting others down, cutting them off from the road to personal fulfillment’. We use language not only to shape reality, but ‘to defend that reality against anyone whose alternative values might threaten ours’ (Hasan, 1996b: 34). But deconstructing ‘reality’ requires a ‘disturbance of daily habits and communal beliefs’ (1996b:34). Rather than this being a matter of a bit of common sense and a few facts, Hasan argues not only that there is a central role for linguistics in the study of ideology, but that the greatest justification for technical disciplines including linguistics is precisely to ‘disturb the suspension of disbelief which the everyday linguistic practices of a community perpetuate’ (1996b:34). But only a linguistic theory capable of explaining how language is a carrier of ideology will be of any use. Paradoxically, this is a topic on which Chomsky the linguist has nothing to say.

Notes

- 1 Boyd-Barrett (2004: 436) argues that a more contemporary reading of the ‘anti-communism’ filter would be the belief in the ‘supposed benefits of neoliberal global capitalism’.
- 2 Boyd-Barrett (2004: 435) proposes a sixth filter for the model, to include ‘the “buying out” of journalists or their publications by intelligence and related special interest organizations’.
- 3 Viz. their comment on the need for ‘macro, alongside a micro- (story-by-story) view of media operations to see the pattern of manipulation and systematic bias’, Herman and Chomsky, 2002[1988]: 2.
- 4 Space prevents a detailed discussion of the intellectual origins of Chomsky’s ‘Cartesian linguistics’, but see Aarsleff (1970).
- 5 This is an arbitrary choice; and Chomsky’s language of description has changed since he published his book. But while the descriptive architecture has changed, the basic tenets of his theory and the idealizations on which it is based have not substantially altered since then.
- 6 See http://www.trumanlibrary.org/whistlestop/study_collections/coldwar/documents/sectioned.php?pagenumber=1&documentdate=1950-04-12&documentid=10-1 for original document.
- 7 I searched *Journalism* (search conducted August 2011) with the following results: 271 hits for ‘language’, 301 for ‘discourse’; the combined hits for ‘propaganda’ and ‘ideology/ideological’ were 460.
- 8 Edelman, for instance, rejects Chomsky’s ‘language acquisition device’ (Edelman, 1992, cited in Halliday, 2003a[1995]: 396) and Deacon (1997: 35) rejects Chomsky’s account of language evolution as a ‘hopeful monster’ theory, the ‘evolutionary theorist’s counterpart to divine intervention’.

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Biographical note

Annabelle Lukin is Senior Lecturer in Linguistics, in the Centre for Language in Social Life, Macquarie University. The centre specializes in the study of language as a social, semiotic system. Her research interests include media and political discourse, stylistics, and language and education. She is co-editor of *The Development of Language: Functional Perspectives on Species and Individuals* (Continuum, 2004), and has published in discourse studies journals (e.g. *Discourse and Society*, *Linguistics and the Human Sciences*), and in edited volumes (e.g. *Applicable Linguistics: Texts, Contexts and Meanings*, Continuum, 2010, and *Communicating Conflict: Multilingual Case Studies of the News Media*, Continuum, 2008).