CHAPTER 4) MAGIC FORMULAS

"Never try to discourage thinking for you are sure to succeed".[1]

(Bertrand Russell)

"We should not judge facts based on arguments, but arguments based on facts, because facts do not depend on words, whereas words depend on facts".[2]

(Misone of Chene)

Social Justice reproduces the paradigm of deconstruction across various contexts, seeking out "social constructs" that conceal mechanisms of oppression. Its *"modus operandi"* is relatively straightforward and objectively tedious. The superficiality with which it typically addresses complex issues stems from its ultimate aim: transforming the world, not explaining it.

To achieve its goals, it relies on the same operational tools that authoritarian regimes of the last century depended upon: propaganda, truth manipulation, and the politicization of every aspect of existence. Within the theoretical framework of Social Justice, language is, unsurprisingly, the preeminent instrument for transforming reality. Accompanied by behaviors that challenge existing power dynamics—perceived as rooted in the oppression of minorities—the theorists of Social Justice firmly believe that language is the key to creating a new and fairer world. In this chapter, I will examine the role of language as a tool of social struggle, the emphasis placed on its alleged performative

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[1] **BERTRAND RUSSELL**, "*The Best Answer to Fanaticism: liberalism,"* **New York Times,** December 16, 1951.

[2] *"Ἔφασκε δὲ μὴ ἐκ τῶν λόγων τὰ πράγματα, ἀλλ' ἐκ τῶν πραγμάτων τοὺς λόγους ζητεῖν: οὐ γὰρ ἕνεκα τῶν λόγων τὰ πράγματα συντελεῖσθαι, ἀλλ' ἕνεκα τῶν πραγμάτων τοὺς λόγους."* **MISON OF CHENE** in Diogenes Laertius, "*Lives and Doctrines of the Illustrious Philosophers,"* Book I, Chapter 9, 108.

nature, and the theoretical origins of the claim that social relations can be transformed through linguistic manipulation.

4.1 Abracadabra

The meaning of "Abracadabra" is lost in the mists of time. As far as I know, the earliest mention of this word appears in Quintus Serenus Sammonicus,[3] a Roman physician who lived during the reign of Caracalla; he recommended writing it on a piece of paper to carry as a charm against malaria symptoms.

Its origin is uncertain: it might derive from Aramaic, Greek, or ancient Hebrew. Among the many interpretations attributed to this expression, my favorite is "I create by speaking," though I admit it is not the most probable. Given that it was used to treat illnesses, it was likely a formula to make something disappear rather than create it.

For millennia, humans have cultivated the ambition to alter the world through the magic of words. Invoking the benevolent intervention of a deity, reciting magical formulas to heal or ward off misfortune, are practices that have accompanied humanity for ages and, like much superstitious thought, serve a consolatory function.

The idea of changing our destiny by uttering mysterious words in an unknown language from a distant past is an illusion that has always fascinated humanity. In the 20th century, this naive form of magical thinking evolved, focusing on the power of language to influence human reasoning and social behavior.

Marr's attempt to replace Russian with a revolutionary new language capable of fostering the formation of a new communist

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[3] **QUINTO SAMMONICO SERENO**, *Liber Medicinalis*, *Hemitritaeo depellendo,* v. 935.

consciousness is an example of this evolution of magical thinking in the 20th century. However, the notion that human behavior is influenced by the characteristics of the spoken language was not confined to Soviet linguistics.

In the mid-20th century, the American linguist Benjamin Whorf proposed the fascinating hypothesis that our perception—and thus our relationship with the world—is shaped by the linguistic tools we use. This idea was undoubtedly influenced by Edward Sapir.

"Human beings do not live in the objective world alone, nor alone in the world of social activity as ordinarily understood, but are very much at the mercy of the particular language which has become the medium of expression for their society. It is quite an illusion to imagine that one adjusts to reality essentially without the use of language and that language is merely an incidental means of solving specific problems of communication or reflection. The fact of the matter is that the "real world" is to a large extent unconsciously built up on the language habits of the group. . . . We see and hear and otherwise experience very largely as we do because the language habits of our community predispose certain choices of interpretation".[4]

It is reasonable to think that language has a relationship with our perception of the world and influences how social relations manifest themselves. As a communication tool, it plays a role in the transmission of knowledge. Thus, it is reasonable to think that the efficiency of linguistic tools contributes to the development of cognitive abilities.

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[4] **BENJAMIN WHORF**, *"The Relation of habitual thought and behavior to language,"* in *Language, Thought, and Reality*, **The M.L.T. Press,** Cambridge - Massachusetts, 1956, Italian translation edited by **FRANCESCO CIALONI**, *"La relazione del pensiero e del comportamento con il linguaggio"* in *Linguaggio, Pensiero e Realtà, 7th edition*, **Bollati Boringhieri, Turin**, 2021 p. 99.

For example, modern mathematics would not have developed had the positional number system based on the decimal system not been adopted—an innovation brought to the world by a more efficient formal language from India.

It is also reasonable to think that language, understood as a form of communication, determines how we manage relationships and, together with the complex of traditions and customs we identify as culture, contributes to defining social equilibria. However, this does not imply that the evolution of language is entirely independent of facts or the communication needs imposed by those facts.

Whorf, on the other hand, asserts that:

"We dissect nature along lines laid down by our native languages. The categories and types that we isolate from the world of phenomena we do not find there because they stare every observer in the face; on the contrary, the world is presented in a kaleidoscopic flux of impressions which has to be organized by our minds—and this means largely by the linguistic systems in our minds. We cut nature up, organize it into concepts, and ascribe significances as we do, largely because we are parties to an agreement to organize it in this way—an agreement that holds throughout our speech community and is codified in the patterns of our language".[5]

Personally, I do not agree with this concept, or at least with its currently popular interpretation. The agreement by which we "dissect nature," create categories, distinguish, and associate, cannot be divorced from the need to interpret and represent the environment in which a community lives. We cannot imagine

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[5] **BENJAMIN WORF**, *"Science and Linguistic"* in *Language, Thought, and Reality*, **The M.L.T. Press,** Cambridge - Massachusetts, 1956, Italian translation edited by **FRANCESCO CIALONI**, *"Scienza e linguistica", in Linguaggio, Pensiero e Realtà, 7th edition*, **Bollati Boringhieri**, Turin, 2021 p. 169.

that a linguistic system evolves independently of its ability to meet the needs of the linguistic community that adopts it.

The Sapir-Whorf hypothesis points to the existence of a relationship between language and the perception of reality, which inevitably implies a relationship between how reality is represented and the community of speakers. The fact that such a relationship exists tells us nothing about its nature. Language is influenced by the needs of its speakers, which are in turn determined by the world around them. Moreover, it undoubtedly plays a role in managing power dynamics or emotional relationships among individuals. Defining the exact nature of this relationship, however, is another matter entirely.

The Sapir-Whorf hypothesis has so captivated the worlds of deconstruction and Social Justice that it has been used as the foundation for a comprehensive program to moralize society—albeit not without first being revised and expanded.

If language determines the perception of reality and defines power relations based on entirely illusory grounds, then altering linguistic structures could, in theory, modify reality and improve social organization, liberating it from oppressive power dynamics.

These arguments rest on weak logic and go far beyond the original Sapir-Whorf hypothesis. Language is no longer viewed as one possible determinant of reality perception but rather as the sole—or at least the primary—variable capable of shaping our worldview, our emotional capacity, and the way we manage relationships.

From the perspective of Social Justice theorists, changing language can alter power relations by imposing a different perception of reality. For instance, abolishing grammatical gender in a language could supposedly reveal the illusion of biological sex and gender, thereby enabling the free development

of individuals beyond the culturally imposed hierarchical binary system. Eliminating violent or offensive expressions could eradicate violence and aggression from human society. Removing any reference to racism, obesity, or disability could construct a society free of prejudice.

The goal of this program to moralize society becomes the elimination of those linguistic structures deemed discriminatory and considered the root of humanity's worst instincts.

Drawing on Austin's concept of doing things with words, the entire linguistic system is imbued with a performative nature, seen as capable of fully determining who we are and what we think.

4.2 Doing things with words

John Austin, an English philosopher of language, introduced the concept of the speech act, which is performed through a performative utterance. These utterances have two key characteristics:

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