

LANGUAGE AND CULTURAL INTERACTION IN SAVAGES (*)

Thais Flores Nogueira Diniz

UFMG - Mestranda

"To understand man's humanity one must understand the language that makes him human".

Language is everywhere. It permeates our thoughts, mediates our relations with others and even creeps into our dreams. Most human knowledge is stored and transmitted through language. So it may be seen as much more than the external expression and communication of thoughts: language is a part of culture, of that entire way of life shared by the members of a community. If language is a part of culture, it is true that culture is transmitted through it. The fact that mankind has a history and animals do not is the result of language. Possession of language distinguishes man from other animals. "To understand man's humanity one must understand the language that makes him human".¹ According to the philosophy expressed in the myths and religions of many peoples, it is language which is the source of human life and power. To some people of Africa a newborn child is a thing, not yet a person, because the baby has no language, and perhaps for the same reason, to English people a baby is it. Only by the act of learning language does the child become a human being. Thus, according

* This essay was written as part of the evaluation of the course Master's Degree, under Professor Dr. Ana Lúcia Gazolla, at FALE - UFMG.

to this tradition, we all become human because we all know at least one language.

However, verbal language, the language of words (written or spoken) is only one of the aspects of language, and it may be more or less valued. The French theoretician Antonin Artaud, for example, discarded verbal language in favour of gesture and symbol on the stage. Theatre and life, for him, were part of the same process. This conviction was embraced by many American playwrights who gave emphasis to physicality, spectacle and performance as a reaction against the dominance of verbal language, which, according to Artaud, "might not be removed, but cut down to size".² The British theatre resisted this precept remarkably, mainly because of its highly traditional form, and also because of the English people's worship for their own language. For the most part, the British theatre remained committed to a more conservative view of the theatre, in which verbal language continues to have a more important role than other forms. So, in the sixties, we find, among many British writers, those who show not only how language can function as a whole generation's voice, but also how the language of drama can be connected with social and physical manipulation, as an instrument of social control and moral evasion.

This paper is an attempt to study a play by one of those writers, Christopher Hampton's Savages, from the viewpoint of language both as a manifestation of human life, and as an instrument of power.

The play is made up of two subplays: a didactic play concerning the mass murder of Brazilian Indians and a personal drama having as characters Alan West, an English diplomat, and Carlos, a Brazilian guerrilla fighter.

I've tried to analyse Alan West in relation to the other

characters. He appears in almost all of the scenes of the play, except for scenes such as 7 and 14 that function as a narration, although facts are told through a dialogue between an American investigator and a soldier. First Alan West takes side with an anthropologist; together they denounce the extermination of the Brazilian Indians. Their attitude as a whole is almost an attempt to protect ecology, as if the savages were specimens in extinction. Secondly, West allies himself with a British member of the SPI (Indian Protection Service) and with an American missionary. Together they accept the inevitable extermination of the Indians. Allegedly their attitude as a whole is now that of an effort to "integrate" the Indians as if they deserved "salvation" despite their status as inferior beings. Finally West identifies himself with the savages when he functions as a translator of their myths. In fact, however, he acts as a murderer, who symbolically kills the Indians even as he is translating their myths into poetry, without a true appreciation of the myths as an expression of Indian life.

Language here would be connected with a kind of "gradient of humanity", a continuum of degrees which vary from [+ human] on one side and [- human] on the other. Articulate language is placed at the [+ human] side and no language at all at the [- human] side. The more articulate the language is, the more human the person is considered. For this reason the Indian maid who never speaks in the play is ridiculed and regarded as ignorant by West's wife. Likewise the Indians hardly speak at Major Brigg's and Rev. Elmer's houses, and coincidentally they are slaves. Verbal language, on the contrary, is used by the major and the priest. The former is convinced that, since there is no hope for the Indians, it would save trouble if the extermination could be completed as quickly as possible.

The latter claims that he has succeeded in changing the lives of the savages by converting them to Christianity. In the scenes where the savages appear, they only use gestures, not verbal language. While they are performing their rites, Alan West recites their myths, now translated into poems in English. Therefore, the Indians are presented as if they were unable to articulate their own experience and life, which have to be now translated by a more erudite voice, which holds superiority not only at a linguistic level but also at a cultural and human level.

So, verbal and articulate language, besides being a manifestation of humanity, becomes an instrument of power: Major Brigg, Rev. Elmer and West, by using it, exert dominance over the Indian people.

But language becomes an instrument of power also in the second subplay. As each language in the world is spoken by the people of a country, each connotes patriotism and independence. Giving ground to another language under pressure thus stands for submission. West, as a prisoner, is not allowed by Carlos to make poetry in his own language. Carlos, as a guerrilla, is fighting against foreign dominance. His concern is not with the Indians as a people. For him they represent a small group within the entire Brazilian people, who are killed by poverty in the slums everyday. His fight is against the class system and dictatorship in Brazil. These are, in his opinion, responsible for the Brazilian situation of oppression and underdevelopment.

The English writers in the sixties and seventies have rejected the gestual theatre in favour of a verbal one. Christopher Hampton, on relating verbal language to certain groups of people like the Whites, is following the trend of

his contemporaries, while he is subtly praising those groups. As the same time that the play is understood as a denunciation of the extermination of minorities and of cultural domination, it is subtly permeated by racial and linguistic prejudice.

NOTES

¹ Fromkin & Rodman "What is Language". In An Introduction to Language. Holt Rinehart and Winston Inc., 1975. p. 1.

² Artaud, Antonin. The Theatre and its Double. New York: Grove Press Inc. 1958, p. 89.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

- Artaud, Antonin. The Theatre and its Double. New York: Grove Press Inc., 1958.
- Fromkin & Rodman. "What is Language?" In: An Introduction to Language. Holt Rinehart and Winston Inc., 1974.
- Hampton, Christopher. Savages. London: Faber & Faber, 1981.
- Hayman, Ronald. British Theatre since 1955: a Reassessment. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1979.
- Lyons, John. Language and Linguistics. Cambridge University Press, 1981.
- Oliveira, S. R. "Ideology, Education and the English Teacher". Estudos Germânicos. Vol. V, 1985.
- Robins, R. H. General Linguistics: An Introductory Survey. London: Longman, 1967.
- The New Encyclopaedia Britannica in 30 volumes. Chicago: Helen Hemingway Benton Publishers. 15th ed. 1982, vol. 10.
- West, Fred. The Way of Language: An Introduction. New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich Inc., 1975.