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FOCUS: OPINION

Journalism and 'the words of power'

By Robert Fisk



Robert Fisk spoke at the fifth Al Jazeera annual forum [EPA]

Robert Fisk, *The Independent* newspaper's Middle East correspondent, gave the following address to the fifth Al Jazeera annual forum on May 23.

Power and the media are not just about cosy relationships between journalists and political leaders, between editors and presidents. They are not just about the parasitic-osmotic relationship between supposedly honourable reporters and the nexus of power that runs between White House and state department and Pentagon, between Downing Street and the foreign office and the ministry of defence. In the western context, power and the media is about words - and the use of words.

It is about semantics.

It is about the employment of phrases and clauses and their origins. And it is about the misuse of history; and about our ignorance of history.

More and more today, we journalists have become prisoners of the language of power.

Is this because we no longer care about linguistics? Is this because lap-tops 'correct' our spelling, 'trim' our grammar so that our sentences so often turn out to be identical to those of our rulers? Is this why newspaper editorials today often sound like political speeches?

Let me show you what I mean.

For two decades now, the US and British - and Israeli and Palestinian - leaderships have used the words 'peace process' to define the hopeless, inadequate, dishonourable agreement that allowed the US and Israel to dominate whatever slivers of land would be given to an occupied people.

I first queried this expression, and its provenance, at the time of Oslo - although how easily we forget that the secret surrenders at Oslo were themselves a conspiracy without any legal basis. Poor old Oslo, I always think! What did Oslo ever do to deserve this? It was the White House agreement that sealed this preposterous and dubious treaty - in which refugees, borders, Israeli colonies - even timetables - were to be delayed until they could no longer be negotiated.

And how easily we forget the White House lawn - though, yes, we remember the

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images - upon which it was Clinton who quoted from the Qur'an, and Arafat who chose to say: "Thank you, thank you, thank you, Mr. President." And what did we call this nonsense afterwards? Yes, it was 'a moment of history'! Was it? Was it so?

Do you remember what Arafat called it? "The peace of the brave." But I don't remember any of us pointing out that "the peace of the brave" was used originally by General de Gaulle about the end of the Algerian war. The French lost the war in Algeria. We did not spot this extraordinary irony.

Same again today. We western journalists - used yet again by our masters - have been reporting our jolly generals in Afghanistan as saying that their war can only be won with a "hearts and minds" campaign. No-one asked them the obvious question: Wasn't this the very same phrase used about Vietnamese civilians in the Vietnam war? And didn't we - didn't the West - lose the war in Vietnam?

Yet now we western journalists are actually using - about Afghanistan - the phrase 'hearts and minds' in our reports as if it is a new dictionary definition rather than a symbol of defeat for the second time in four decades, in some cases used by the very same soldiers who peddled this nonsense - at a younger age - in Vietnam.

Just look at the individual words which we have recently co-opted from the US military.

When we westerners find that 'our' enemies - al-Qaeda, for example, or the Taliban - have set off more bombs and staged more attacks than usual, we call it 'a spike in violence'. Ah yes, a 'spike'!

A 'spike' in violence, ladies and gentlemen is a word first used, according to my files, by a brigadier general in the Baghdad Green Zone in 2004. Yet now we use that phrase, we extemporise on it, we relay it on the air as our phrase. We are using, quite literally, an expression created for us by the Pentagon. A spike, of course, goes sharply up, then sharply downwards. A 'spike' therefore avoids the ominous use of the words 'increase in violence' - for an increase, ladies and gentlemen, might not go down again afterwards.

Now again, when US generals refer to a sudden increase in their forces for an assault on Fallujah or central Baghdad or Kandahar - a mass movement of soldiers brought into Muslim countries by the tens of thousands - they call this a 'surge'. And a surge, like a tsunami, or any other natural phenomena, can be devastating in its effects. What these 'surges' really are - to use the real words of serious journalism - are reinforcements. And reinforcements are sent to wars when armies are losing those wars. But our television and newspaper boys and girls are still talking about 'surges' without any attribution at all! The Pentagon wins again.

Meanwhile the 'peace process' collapsed. Therefore our leaders - or 'key players' as we like to call them - tried to make it work again. Therefore the process had to be put 'back on track'. It was a railway train, you see. The carriages had come off the line. So the train had to be put 'back on track'. The Clinton administration first used this phrase, then the Israelis, then the BBC.

But there was a problem when the 'peace process' had been put 'back on track' - and still came off the line. So we produced a 'road map' - run by a Quartet and led by our old Friend of God, Tony Blair, who - in an obscenity of history - we now refer to as a 'peace envoy'.

But the 'road map' isn't working. And now, I notice, the old 'peace process' is back in our newspapers and on our television screens. And two days ago, on CNN, one of those boring old fogies that the TV boys and girls call 'experts' - I'll come back to them in a moment - told us again that the 'peace process' was being put 'back on track' because of the opening of 'indirect talks' between Israelis and Palestinians.

Ladies and gentlemen, this isn't just about clichés - this is preposterous journalism. There is no battle between power and the media. Through language, we have become them.

Maybe one problem is that we no longer think for ourselves because we no longer read books. The Arabs still read books - I'm not talking here about Arab illiteracy rates - but I'm not sure that we in the West still read books. I often dictate messages over the phone and find I have to spend ten minutes to repeat to someone's secretary a mere hundred words. They don't know how to spell.

I was on a plane the other day, from Paris to Beirut - the flying time is about three

hours and 45 minutes - and the woman next to me was reading a French book about the history of the Second World War. And she was turning the page every few seconds. She had finished the book before we reached Beirut! And I suddenly realised she wasn't reading the book - she was surfing the pages! She had lost the ability to what I call 'deep read'. Is this one of our problems as journalists, I wonder, that we no longer 'deep read'? We merely use the first words that come to hand ...

Let me show you another piece of media cowardice that makes my 63-year-old teeth grind together after 34 years of eating humus and tahina in the Middle East.

We are told, in so many analysis features, that what we have to deal with in the Middle East are 'competing narratives'. How very cosy. There's no justice, no injustice, just a couple of people who tell different history stories. 'Competing narratives' now regularly pop up in the British press. The phrase is a species - or sub-species - of the false language of anthropology. It deletes the possibility that one group of people - in the Middle East, for example - are occupied, while another group of people are doing the occupying. Again, no justice, no injustice, no oppression or oppressing, just some friendly 'competing narratives', a football match, if you like, a level playing field because the two sides are - are they not - 'in competition'. It's two sides in a football match. And two sides have to be given equal time in every story.

So an 'occupation' can become a 'dispute'. Thus a 'wall' becomes a 'fence' or a 'security barrier'. Thus Israeli colonisation of Arab land contrary to all international law becomes 'settlements' or 'outposts' or 'Jewish neighbourhoods'.

You will not be surprised to know that it was Colin Powell, in his starring, powerless appearance as secretary of state to George W. Bush, who told US diplomats in the Middle East to refer to occupied Palestinian land as 'disputed land' - and that was good enough for most of the American media.

So watch out for 'competing narratives', ladies and gentlemen. There are no 'competing narratives', of course, between the US military and the Taliban. When there are, however, you'll know the West has lost.

But I'll give you a lovely, personal example of how 'competing narratives' come undone. Last month, I gave a lecture in Toronto to mark the 95th anniversary of the 1915 Armenian genocide, the deliberate mass murder of one and a half million Armenian Christians by the Ottoman Turkish army and militia. Before my talk, I was interviewed on Canadian Television, CTV, which also owns the Toronto *Globe and Mail* newspaper. And from the start, I could see that the interviewer had a problem. Canada has a large Armenian community. But Toronto also has a large Turkish community. And the Turks, as *the Globe and Mail* always tell us, "hotly dispute" that this was a genocide. So the interviewer called the genocide "deadly massacres".

Of course, I spotted her specific problem straight away. She could not call the massacres a 'genocide', because the Turkish community would be outraged. But equally, she sensed that 'massacres' on its own - especially with the gruesome studio background photographs of dead Armenians - was not quite up to defining a million and a half murdered human beings. Hence the 'deadly massacres'. How odd!!! If there are 'deadly' massacres, are there some massacres which are not 'deadly', from which the victims walk away alive? It was a ludicrous tautology.

In the end, I told this little tale of journalistic cowardice to my Armenian audience, among whom were sitting CTV executives. Within an hour of my ending, my Armenian host received an SMS about me from a CTV reporter. "Shitting on CTV was way out of line," the reporter complained. I doubted, personally, if the word 'shitting' would find its way onto CTV. But then, neither does 'genocide'. I'm afraid 'competing narratives' had just exploded.

Yet the use of the language of power - of its beacon-words and its beacon-phrases - goes on among us still. How many times have I heard western reporters talking about 'foreign fighters' in Afghanistan? They are referring, of course, to the various Arab groups supposedly helping the Taliban. We heard the same story from Iraq. Saudis, Jordanians, Palestinian, Chechen fighters, of course. The generals called them 'foreign fighters'. And then immediately we western reporters did the same. Calling them 'foreign fighters' meant they were an invading force. But not once - ever - have I heard a mainstream western television station refer to the fact that there are at least 150,000 'foreign fighters' in Afghanistan. And that most of them,

ladies and gentlemen, are in American or other Nato uniforms!

Similarly, the pernicious phrase 'Af-Pak' - as racist as it is politically dishonest - is now used by reporters when it originally was a creation of the US state department, on the day that Richard Holbrooke was appointed special US representative to Afghanistan and Pakistan. But the phrase avoided the use of the word 'India' whose influence in Afghanistan and whose presence in Afghanistan, is a vital part of the story. Furthermore, 'Af-Pak' - by deleting India - effectively deleted the whole Kashmir crisis from the conflict in south-east Asia. It thus deprived Pakistan of any say in US local policy on Kashmir - after all, Holbrooke was made the 'Af-Pak' envoy, specifically forbidden from discussing Kashmir. Thus the phrase 'Af-Pak', which totally deletes the tragedy of Kashmir - too many 'competing narratives', perhaps? - means that when we journalists use the same phrase, 'Af-Pak', which was surely created for us journalists, we are doing the state department's work.

Now let's look at history. Our leaders love history. Most of all, they love the Second World War. In 2003, George W. Bush thought he was Churchill as well as George W. Bush. True, Bush had spent the Vietnam war protecting the skies of Texas from the Vietcong. But now, in 2003, he was standing up to the 'appeasers' who did not want a war with Saddam who was, of course, 'the Hitler of the Tigris'. The appeasers were the British who did not want to fight Nazi Germany in 1938. Blair, of course, also tried on Churchill's waistcoat and jacket for size. No 'appeaser' he. America was Britain's oldest ally, he proclaimed - and both Bush and Blair reminded journalists that the US had stood shoulder-to-shoulder with Britain in her hour of need in 1940.

But none of this was true.

Britain's old ally was not the United States. It was Portugal, a neutral fascist state during World War Two. Only my own newspaper, *The Independent*, picked this up.

Nor did America fight alongside Britain in her hour of need in 1940, when Hitler threatened invasion and the German air force blitzed London. No, in 1940 America was enjoying a very profitable period of neutrality - and did not join Britain in the war until Japan attacked the US naval base at Pearl Harbour in December of 1941.

Ouch!

Back in 1956, I read the other day, Eden called Nasser the 'Mussolini of the Nile'. A bad mistake. Nasser was loved by the Arabs, not hated as Mussolini was by the majority of Africans, especially the Arab Libyans. The Mussolini parallel was not challenged or questioned by the British press. And we all know what happened at Suez in 1956.

Yes, when it comes to history, we journalists really do let the presidents and prime ministers take us for a ride.

Today, as foreigners try to take food and fuel by sea to the hungry Palestinians of Gaza, we journalists should be reminding our viewers and listeners of a long-ago day when America and Britain went to the aid of a surrounded people, bringing food and fuel - our own servicemen dying as they did so - to help a starving population. That population had been surrounded by a fence erected by a brutal army which wished to starve the people into submission. The army was Russian. The city was Berlin. The wall was to come later. The people had been our enemies only three years earlier. Yet we flew the Berlin airlift to save them. Now look at Gaza today. Which western journalist - and we love historical parallels - has even mentioned 1948 Berlin in the context of Gaza?

Look at more recent times. Saddam had 'weapons of mass destruction' - you can fit 'WMD' into a headline - but of course, he didn't, and the American press went through embarrassing bouts of self-condemnation afterwards. How could it have been so misled, *the New York Times* asked itself? It had not, the paper concluded, challenged the Bush administration enough.

And now the very same paper is softly - very softly - banging the drums for war in Iran. Iran is working on WMD. And after the war, if there is a war, more self-condemnation, no doubt, if there are no nuclear weapons projects.

Yet the most dangerous side of our new semantic war, our use of the words of power - though it is not a war since we have largely surrendered - is that it isolates us from our viewers and readers. They are not stupid. They understand words, in many cases - I fear - better than we do. History, too. They know that we are drowning our vocabulary with the language of generals and presidents, from the so-

called elites, from the arrogance of the Brookings Institute experts, or those of those of the Rand Corporation or what I call the 'TINK THANKS'. Thus we have become part of this language.

Here, for example, are some of the danger words:

- POWER PLAYERS
- ACTIVISM
- NON-STATE ACTORS
- KEY PLAYERS
- GEOSTRATEGIC PLAYERS
- NARRATIVES
- EXTERNAL PLAYERS
- PEACE PROCESS
- MEANINGFUL SOLUTIONS
- AF-PAK
- CHANGE AGENTS (whatever these sinister creatures are).

I am not a regular critic of Al Jazeera. It gives me the freedom to speak on air. Only a few years ago, when Wadah Khanfar (now Director General of Al Jazeera) was Al Jazeera's man in Baghdad, the US military began a slanderous campaign against Wadah's bureau, claiming - untruthfully - that Al Jazeera was in league with al-Qaeda because they were receiving videotapes of attacks on US forces. I went to Fallujah to check this out. Wadah was 100 per cent correct. Al-Qaeda was handing in their ambush footage without any warning, pushing it through office letter-boxes. The Americans were lying.

Wadah is, of course, wondering what is coming next.

Well, I have to tell you, ladies and gentlemen, that all those 'danger words' I have just read out to you - from KEY PLAYERS to NARRATIVES to PEACE PROCESS to AF-PAK - all occur in the nine-page Al Jazeera programme for this very forum.

I'm not condemning Al Jazeera for this, ladies and gentlemen. Because this vocabulary is not adopted through political connivance. It is an infection that we all suffer from - I've used 'peace process' a few times myself, though with quotation marks which you can't use on television - but yes, it's a contagion.

And when we use these words, we become one with the power and the elites which rule our world without fear of challenge from the media. Al Jazeera has done more than any television network I know to challenge authority, both in the Middle East and in the West. (And I am not using 'challenge' in the sense of 'problem', as in "'I face many challenges,'" says General McCrystal.)

How do we escape this disease? Watch out for the spell-checkers in our lap-tops, the sub-editor's dreams of one-syllable words, stop using Wikipedia. And read books - real books, with paper pages, which means deep reading. History books, especially.

Al Jazeera is giving good coverage to the flotilla - the convoy of boats setting off for Gaza. I don't think they are a bunch of anti-Israelis. I think the international convoy is on its way because people aboard these ships - from all over the world - are trying to do what our supposedly humanitarian leaders have failed to do. They are bringing food and fuel and hospital equipment to those who suffer. In any other context, the Obamas and the Sarkozys and the Camerons would be competing to land US Marines and the Royal Navy and French forces with humanitarian aid - as Clinton did in Somalia. Didn't the God-like Blair believe in humanitarian 'intervention' in Kosovo and Sierra Leone?

In normal circumstances, Blair might even have put a foot over the border.

But no. We dare not offend the Israelis. And so ordinary people are trying to do what their leaders have culpably failed to do. Their leaders have failed them.

Have the media? Are we showing documentary footage of the Berlin airlift today?

Or of Clinton's attempt to rescue the starving people of Somalia, of Blair's humanitarian 'intervention' in the Balkans, just to remind our viewers and readers - and the people on those boats - that this is about hypocrisy on a massive scale?

The hell we are! We prefer 'competing narratives'. Few politicians want the Gaza voyage to reach its destination - be its end successful, farcical or tragic. We believe in the 'peace process', the 'road map'. Keep the 'fence' around the Palestinians. Let the 'key players' sort it out.

Ladies and gentlemen, I am not your 'key speaker' this morning.

I am your guest, and I thank you for your patience in listening to me.

Source: Al Jazeera

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