

A Semiotic Analysis of the UNESCO, World Bank and IMF's Language Literacy Ideology: Engaging the Third World Countries in a Deadly Liaison

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Abstract

As indicated by Hurlbert and Mason (2006), it is through the alliance among UNESCO, the World Bank, the IMF and the United States that the United Nations commits violence on a global scale, which includes replacing illiteracy policies with business literacy, attacking diversity of thought and expression, academic freedom, teacher knowledge and freedom and so on. In this paper, I argued that there was another liaison existing outside the UNESCO/World Bank/IMF/U.S.A. alliance, a link with which the Third World countries were forced to connect without the alternatives. Based on a semiotic analysis of the ideology embedded in the IMF/World Bank literacy policies, I indicated that their hidden agenda was to engage the Third World countries in a deadly relationship, making them gradually lose their economical and intellectual autonomy and fall a prey to their unequal partners' exploitation. At the end of the paper, I pointed out that the exits of the deadly relationship were also hidden in the literacy discourses constructed by UNESCO, the World Bank and the IMF.

Keywords: UNESCO, the World Bank, the IMF, semiotic, ideology

1. Introduction

The concept that literacy is violence is not just a rhetorical argument. Rather, it has already been realized in the continent of Africa. Based on the reports by African Watch, Caffentzis (1999) in his study mentioned several violent incidences caused by the Structural Adjustment Program (SAP) which the World Bank launched in the mid-1980s. Caffentzis pointed out that the

most conspicuous case among the confrontations between African students and security forces in the anti-SAP protests happened in May 1989 when dozens of the protesters were murdered in their demonstration against SAP.

In 1990, due to the conditionalities of a 120 million WB Sectional Educational Loan the World Bank set against the universities, as reported by Caffentzis, some students were killed and hundreds were arrested. On May 10, 1990, in the country of



Uganda, two students got killed when peacefully protesting against the cutting of their paper allowances. In addition, in the course of the protests against the Zambian government's doubling of the price of corn-meal, a staple in the Zambian diet, student demonstrators were shot to death under the police's fire.

After a series of violence inflicted against on the African students, one might wonder why these students were so furious to the point that they were willing to protest against SAP, a literacy program proposed by the World Bank, with the possibility of being killed by their national security guards. One may notice that all these violent events were monitored by UNESCO, the World Bank and the IMF (International Momentary Fund) in silence. These violent incidents in Caffentzis's article make it clear that there must be something fundamental wrong with the UNESCO/World Bank/IMF literacy ideology.

In actual fact, the world-wide violence of literacy is activated by UNESCO, the World Bank and the IMF as an alliance. Hurlbert and Mason's article (2006) noted that "[for] many countries, then, joining UNESCO meant borrowing money from the World Bank, whose policies were, again, aligned with US conservative fiscal and political vision. The consequence was the concrete linking of UNESCO and the World Bank and IMF" (p.3). As indicated by Hurlbert and Manson, it is through the alliance among UNESCO, the World Bank, the IMF and the United States that the United Nations commits violence on a global scale, which includes replacing illiteracy policies with business literacy, attacking diversity of thought and expression, academic freedom, teacher knowledge and freedom and so on.

In this paper, I will argue that there is another liaison existing outside the UNESCO/World Bank/IMF/U.S.A. alliance, a link with which the Third World countries are forced to connect without the alternatives. Based on a semiotic analysis of the ideology embedded in the IMF/World Bank literacy policies, I will indicate that their hidden agenda is to engage the Third World countries in a deadly relationship, making them gradually lose their economical and intellectual autonomy and fall a prey to their unequal partners' exploitation. At the end of the paper, I will point out that the exits of the deadly relationship are also hidden in the literacy discourses constructed by UNESCO, the World Bank and the IMF.

2. Greimas' Semiotic Square

In point of fact, the documents published by UNESCO, the World Bank and the IMF and the policies made by them are all different discourses they constructed. Zebroski (2006) defined discourse as the power of language practices to constitute their objects. He also noted that "[discourse] not only create by constructing, but also by excluding, by making invisible, by prohibiting, by silence" (p. 20). In the continent of the Africa, when the anti-Sap protests were met with strict measures of the governments causing thousands of students to be jailed, members of the faculty to be jailed and universities to be closed for prolonged period of time (Federici, 2000), UNESCO, the World Bank and the IMF stood by in silence. In this case, the violence of literacy is narrated in a silent discourse, one form of the discourse used by UNESCO, the World Bank as well as the IMF.

In the following sections of the paper, I plan to use A. J. Greimas' (1987) semiotic square as a tool to detect the hidden ideology or the general pattern of all the discourses narrated by UNESCO, the World Bank and the IMF. Based on Fernandez's interpretation (2001), Greimas's semiotic square can be utilized to deconstruct the hidden ideology embedded in any discourse built on a founding dualism.

In the book, *Imagining Literacy*, Fernandez (2001) demonstrated how the semiotic square works to deconstruct the hidden ideology in a discourse (See Figure 1).

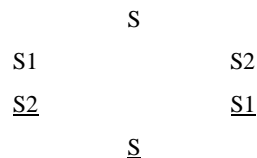


Figure 1 Greimas' Semiotic Square

As indicated by Fernandez, in the Figure I, the founding dualism of a set is S1 and S2. These dualisms are binary opposition such as male/female and so on. Once one inserts any founding dualism into the semiotic square, a series of slots already preexisting in a conceptual and logical process come into being. Cited by Fernandez, Jameson (1987) noted that the square is like a "black box" through which narrative is transformed into cognition and vice versa. The Greimas' semiotic square visualizes the invisible semiotic engine of ideology (Fernandez, 2001).

As to the negatives of S1 and S2, S1 and S2, they include



more than their counterparts. For instance, “non-white” includes more than “black” and “non-male” more than “female”. As illustrated by Fernandez, S is a “utopia” term, implying there might be a path out of this logic, while \underline{S} is a neutral term indicating this logic might be negated. In other words, S and \underline{S} are the synthetic positions implied by the founding four of the square.

One must look more carefully into the third position \underline{S} , which is often referred to as “the third term” in the square. Fernandez noted that because the third term is the least visible in the founding four, it is the very place on which the oppression has targeted. If one wants to deconstruct oppression, the third position/term is the most critical position to start. Based on Fernandez’s interpretation of Greimas’ semiotic square, in order to sustain the stability of all the statistic dualisms, repressing the third term is a must. However, if one’s goal is to destabilize the static dualism in a discourse, he/she must validate the third term/position.

3. A Version of Dependence/Independence Dualism

Using the Greimas’ semiotic square as a tool, I will try to expose the founding dualism of the World Bank and the IMF’s literacy ideology. As indicated by Hurlbert and Mason (2006), when developing countries have problems with trade balance, they are required by the IMF to keep deposits based on the western measure of their capacity so that they can get economic aids. Naturally, when the African countries are measured against the international currency, they do not measure well. In other words, when accepting the World Bank and the IMF’s austere measures, these borrowing countries are entrapped in a deadly relationship from which they are not able to disengage easily.

At the same time, the World Bank and the IMF will devise literacy policies which they deem necessary for the Third World countries to follow, such as the Structural Adjustment Program (SAP). These borrowing countries have to follow these literacy policies, even when some of them dictate dramatic reduction in education funding, as did the conditionalities of SAP (Hurlbert & Mason, 2006). In actual fact, these literacy and education policies are the traps that the World Bank and the IMF use to make the debtor countries economically dependent on the financial aids offered by the foreign institutions.

In addition to engaging the Third World Countries in a deadly relationship in which the borrowing countries are ever-lastingly dependent on the World Bank the IMF, these literacy policies also force the debtor nations into a state of intellectual dependence on the West. For example, Mazrui (2000) indicated that when the Central African Republic (CAR) acquired a World Bank loan, it also had to accept a package of conditions requiring CAR to import its textbooks directly from France and Canada. And this draconian move by the World Bank and the IMF was built on the shaky grounds that printing in the western countries was cheaper than in CAR.

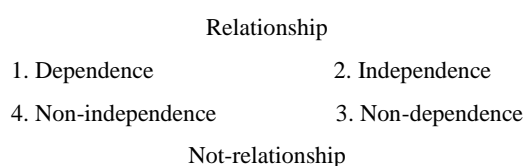


Figure 2 Dependence/Independence Dualism

Based on these examples in the African continent, I think that the founding dualism of UNESCO, the World Bank and the IMF’s literacy discourse is dependence/ independence (See Figure 2). The relationship between dependence/ independence and all the other signifiers in this complex layer of meaning around this dualism can help us expose the pattern by which UNESCO, the World Bank and the IMF construct their literacy discourses.

As indicated by the Figure 2, the founding dualism of this version of the semiotic square, dependence/independence, dominates the structure of the UNESCO/World Bank/IMF literacy discourse. Regarding the semiotic square, Fernandez (2001) noted that the left side of the square, positions one and four, is generally valorized, while the right, positions two and three, is relegated.

Following this line of thinking, the IMF/World Bank-imposed devaluations, structural adjustment programs as well as the transference of economic and politic decision into the hands of international agencies are all the means to make the African continent and the developing countries economically and intellectually dependent on them. When the expansion of education was demanded by all the social forces in the African continent, the SAP program inspired by the World Bank and the IMF ordered the African governments to cease aiding higher education economically, so that the task cannot be undertaken



independently by the public African universities. The phenomenon is comprehensible if we understand that in this version of semiotic square the position two independence is relegated by dependence/independence dualism.

Within the UNESCO/World Bank/IMF literacy ideology, non-dependence, occupying the position three, is central to the stability of the independence/dependence dualism. One may wonder how a country or an individual can be non-dependent in this version of semiotic square. As illustrated by Hurlbert and Mason (2006), when the developing countries wanted to join UNESCO, they had to contribute to UNESCO's education fund. If the countries did not contribute to the fund, they were barred from UNESCO's illiteracy eradication drive.

In my perspective, the non-dependent refers to those countries which have not contributed to the UNESCO's education fund and fallen into the pernicious trap set by the UNESCO/World Bank/IMF literacy policies. Since repressing the third term, non-dependent, is central to the stability of the dependent/independent dualism, these countries also suffered serious consequences for being non-dependent. Because they are not engaged in the relationship with UNESCO in this case, they appeared as poor risks for World Bank loan and IMF investments. Without the economical aids from the World Bank and the IMF, these poor countries were in a state of being non-dependent, at the borderline of being excluded from the global community. As we can see, these "third-term" countries which are subject to the World Bank and the IMF's repression tend to the poorest among the Third-World countries.

In terms of the individuals in the developing countries, these non-dependent individuals could refer to those African students who tried to resist the IMF/World Bank-initiated literacy policies by protesting. Semiotically, these protesting students who occupy the third term in this version of dependence/independence dualism are doomed to be repressed by governments in alliance with the IMF and the World Bank.

As to the fourth position, non-dependence, it is the most difficult to identify among the founding four in this dependence-independence dualism because it occupies the position which is the closest in hierarchy to the first position dependence on the valorized left side. As far as I am concerned, the non-independence countries refer to the developing countries which have not joined UNESCO, but are willing to give it a try because they are intrigued by the rhetoric of the literacy

discourses constructed by UNESCO, the World Bank and the IMF. For the reason that these non-independent countries have not entered the deadly relationship with these western agencies, they still have some unrealistic expectation with the UNESCO/World Bank/IMF alliance. Compared with the non-dependent countries which are skeptical or poor enough not to contribute to their education fund, they are more valorized

Based on the semiotic analysis of the UNESCO, the World Bank and the IMF's literacy policies, I argue that the hidden ideology in any UNESCO/World Bank/IMF discourse is the one favoring the borrowing countries' economic and intellectual dependence. This version of semiotic square reveals that the real motive hidden behind the IMF/World Bank-imposed measures is to deprive the borrowing countries' economic and intellectual autonomy, making them easy to be exploited.

Semiotically, any signs of economical, political and intellectual independence are structural rebellion against the UNESCO/World Bank/IMF literacy ideology. And in reality, any rebellion is met with austere measures to keep the dependence/independence dualism stable as indicated by the violent incidences in the African continent.

4. A Semiotic Analysis of the World Bank and the IMF's Hidden Agenda

On the issue of language as the medium of instruction in African education, Mazrui (2000) reported that there have been two kinds of responses to this issue over the years. On the one hand, the functionalist response states that the English language's global status, its wealth publication and its relationship with the inherited school system make it the best choice as the medium of African education. On the other hand, the nationalist response to this matter is based on UNESCO's position on this issue. As indicated by Mazrui, UNESCO has stated that the African languages are superior to English and other Euro-languages because these native languages enhance the development of the children's cognitive skills for their early education and because the native languages facilitate the acquisition of the acquisition of the Euro-languages, instead of inhabiting it.

As an ally of UNESCO, the World Bank's real motive behind its responses to the issue makes UNESCO's seemingly benevolent intention look dubious. As pointed out by Mazrui, on the surface level, the World Bank seems to be in alliance with



the more nationalist school of thought, promoting the use of Africana native language as the medium of instruction at least in the lower level of elementary education. Nevertheless, in reality, the World Bank has never raised the possibility of using African languages beyond the first years of the elementary school. That exposes the World Bank's real position on this issue that education in the local languages in the earlier schooling is simply a way of helping the African students acquire the imperial languages, English, French and Portuguese, at a later stage.

The World Bank's structural adjustment program is one of the strategies it uses to reinforce the use of English and of the other European languages. Mazrui (2000) pointed out that "the net effect of the World Bank's structural program in education is to transform the African university into a 'white collar' institution, as far as the background of the student body" (p.50). On the surface of things, the lip service the World Bank does is to convince the African governments that because the majority of students come from affluent background, and can pay their own tuition, subsidies to public universities is an ineffective education investment.

In actual fact, the majority of the students can not afford college tuition because they come from the ranks of the peasantry, workers and petty traders. As a result, drop-out rates among students from poor families increase and only the middle and upper class students have more chances of staying at school (Mazrui, 2000). The IMF/World Bank-imposed SAP excludes the lower class of students and grants admission to the upper and the middle class of students who are the most comfortable with the "imperial" language, creating a milieu which favors the use of English and the other European languages.

In terms of the relationship between the issue of language as the medium of instruction and intellectual independence, Mazrui (2000) provided an excellent observation that as the English language is not likely to give the Africans the politico-economic space for intellectual independence, African languages seem to be more capable of providing some room for intellectual maneuver. In order to make the African countries intellectually dependent on the West, depriving the use of their native language is a logical step to take in order to make the dependence/independence dualism stable.

In addition, regarding the issue of whether the English language is able to give the Africans the politico-economic space

for intellectual independence, the language choice made by Muoria for his newspaper *Mumenyereri* can shed some light on it. As indicated by Frederiksen (2006), Henry Muoria whose publishing career ended up with an exile in London for the rest of his life was a leading Kikuyu nationalist publicist during the years between the end of the World War II and the declaration of the Emergency 1952. Even though Muoria's paper *Mumenyereri* was printed in both English and Kikuyu at the beginning, his paper was eventually published in Kikuyu only. Muoria did not have much choice about what language to use for his newspaper since his readers included the rural population and the urban poor. In order to reach and educate his countrymen who mostly came from the lower ranks of the society, printing his newspaper in the native language Kikuyu was the wisest choice he could make.

According to Frederiksen (2006), Muoria believed that the only weapons the Africans had were brains, truth and honesty. In this sense, English is not likely to be a weapon that will empower the Africans' intellectual competence for the reason that about sixty percent of the students in Africa come from the classes of the peasantry, workers and petty traders, who are not likely to have the luxury of living in a multinational suburb where the primary language for communication is English (Mazrui, 2000). Therefore, these African students' unfamiliarity with the English language is doomed to make them vulnerable in the process of learning. Using the "imperial language" as the medium of instruction at school in actual fact disarms most of the African students, making them lose their only weapons to use their brains, to tell truth and to be honest by using their native languages as the mediums.

The World Bank's position on the language issue is understandable, because its support for the African native languages to be used as the means of instruction at the early elementary level will make the African students "non-independent" intellectually and linguistically. As indicated by Mazrui (2000), since supporting for education in the local languages in the earlier years of schooling will foster the acquisition of the imperial languages later on and using African languages is not beyond the first years of the elementary school, instructing the African elementary students in their native language will not lead to their intellectual autonomy eventually. Semiotically, the World Bank's real motive of putting the African elementary school students in a non-independent



position is the closest to its ultimate goal of making the African countries totally dependent on them.

The fact that within the version of semiotic square positions one and four are generally valorized uncovers the mystery regarding the World Bank's seemingly democratic posture toward the issue of language as the medium of instruction. Citing Frederic Jameson (1987), Fernandez (2001) showed that the fourth position in the semiotic square is the position which is the most difficult to identify because its position is the closest in hierarchy to the first. Since the fourth position is the most difficult one to identify among the founding four of the dependent-independent dualism, it is the most perfect place for the World Bank to hide its real motive on the issue regarding which language is to be used as the medium of instruction in African education because it is difficult for the outsider to discern that making these African students being non-independent is one step away from its ultimate goal.

As illustrated by the Greimas' semiotic square, the most important point to note is that repressing the third term, non-dependence, is the most crucial to the stability of the dependence-independence dualism. In this case, I believe that the third position, non-dependence, refers to the African students who are from the lower ranks of the African societies. Because of their family background, they have less degree of affinity with the use of the imperial languages, compared with the middle and upper class students who come from the multi-national suburbs where the primary language is English (Abdulaziz, 1991). Regardless of the issue of the working class students' motivation for learning the imperial languages, these poor students are in fact less dependent on the use of imperial languages. This fact makes them qualify as "the third term" non-dependent in the version of dependence-independence dualism, a major target of repression for the World Bank.

5. Conclusion

Fernandez (2001) noted that "[the] semiotic square is a maddening and fascinating little engine for discourse analysis" (p.23). Maddening as it is, it is a powerful tool kit to deconstruct the hidden ideology of the UNESCO/World Bank/IMF discourse. Using semiotic square as a tool, I have examined their literacy policies, finding that their discourse is after all a version of dependence/independence dualism. All of the policies and programs proposed by UNESCO, the World

Bank and the IMF are tactics to create a deadly relationship in which the African countries or the Third World countries are doomed to economically and intellectually depend on their powerful partners more and more. Eventually, these borrowing countries are to be degraded into a state of total dependence in which they are free to be exploited by the western agencies.

Ironically, no matter how bleak this picture is, like the other squares, this version of semiotic square implied that the dependence/independence dualism can be negated and that the path leading out of the logic is in existence. For instance, the validation of the third term non-dependence in this version of square can radically destabilize the static dependence/independence dualism. The ways to disengage this deadly relationship with the UNESCO/World Bank/IMF alliance include resisting their literacy policies, raising the lower ranks of African students' awareness of the UNESCO/World Bank/IMF alliance's motives hidden behind its literacy discourses, reconsidering the UNESCO membership offer and so on. The exits of the deadly relationship are out there in the literacy discourses constructed by UNESCO, the World Bank and IMF if we care enough to look for them.

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一個針對聯合國教科文組織、世界銀行暨國際貨幣基金之 語言意識型態的符號學分析：與第三世界國家發生 「致命」的關係

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摘 要

Hurlbert and Mason (2006) 指出聯合國透過與聯合國教科文組織、世界銀行、國際貨幣基金、及美國的結盟，犯下巨大的暴行，例如以商業性的讀寫取代之文盲政策，攻訐思想及表達的多元、學術的自由，暨教師的知識自由等等。在本文中，我主張在這個聯合國教科文組織、世界銀行、國際貨幣基金、及美國的結盟關係之外，存在了另一個第三世界國家被迫需要建立的關係。針對潛藏在國際貨幣基金及世界銀行讀寫政策中的意識型態，做符號學的分析，我指出他們真正的目的是要與第三世界國家產生「致命」的關係，使第三世界國家逐漸失去經濟及理智的自主性，最後任他們強大伙伴的剝削。在文後，我將指出這個致命關係的出口，亦隱藏在聯合國教科文組織、世界銀行、及國際貨幣基金所建構的論述之中。

關鍵詞：聯合國教科文組織、世界銀行、國際貨幣基金、符號學的、意識型態

