

# LANGUAGE AND COMMUNICATION IN A STRUCTURALIST SOCIETY

**Wincharles COKER**

Department of Humanities

Michigan Technological University, Houghton, MI, USA

wcoker@mtu.edu

## **Abstract**

In what ways does the structuralist paradigm of language speak to the underlying constructs of human communication and modern society? How the dynamics of a postmodern society can be understood, while these dynamics remain largely structuralist? In order to answer these two broad questions, I consider in my analysis that language is both a system, and an abstraction of the social structure. By considering the nexus among language, communication, and society, I reflect on how communication is a form of social and symbolic action, which calls up issues of ideology, power and dominance; thus, communication is not just considered as a linear cybernetic transfer of information. As the global society, the African society faces challenges and constraints because of these constructs. The contribution of this article lies in the emphasis of the links which exist between these challenges and these constraints. The paper concludes that studying societies through the structuralist paradigm allows us to see in great detail the position of the self in relation to hegemonic and power dominance. In a word, when we communicate we must be political; our communicative acts are in themselves, *mutatis mutandis*, partisan and ideologically motivated.

**Keywords:** Language, Communication, Society, Structure, Asymmetry

## **1. Introduction**

The nexus between language and communication is particularly fascinating. There is a sense in which one is privileged over and above the other in scholarly circles, although such a medley of intellectual clamors is out of place here. Broadly construed, language is a social currency by which humans trade to meet their communicative ends. Among other means, language is a material medium for communicating thoughts and feelings. Language is,

therefore, the exclusive property of humans, given that it distinguishes us from animals (Berger & Luckmann, 1966; Yule, 1996; Aitchison, 2001). In all media of communication, whether spoken, written, or computer-mediated, language is employed as a mean of communication (Dewey, 1992). In this article I intend to demonstrate how the underlying constructs of structuralism in language and communication reflect and condition the postmodern society. I hope to situate my exegesis in the frameworks set by social and critical theories as expressed in the works of members of the Frankfurt School, as well as in postcolonial discourses. In what follows I provide a fine overview of language both as a system that is strongly rooted in a discernible structure, and as an abstraction of the social structure; moreover, I consider also that language primarily "serves the means of communication" (Levi Strauss, 1958: 5). I would like to think about communication as a form of social and symbolic action, which calls up issues of power and dominance; thus communication is not just a cybernetic transfer of information (see also Carey (1982) and Mattlelart (1996)). Or so I believe.

## 2. Language and Structuralism

Although the Russian phonologist Nikolai Troubetskoy is thought to be "the illustrious founder of structural linguistics" (Levi-Strauss, 1958: 2), a well-informed reading of structural linguistics can hardly ignore the Swiss French linguist Ferdinand de Saussure. In his posthumous *Course in General Linguistics*, Saussure (1916) links up the study of language with structuralism, the dominant thinking of his epoch, Elliott, 2009: 55 as "an attempt to apply linguistics to the study of the impersonal effects of social structures and political systems". In this light, structuralism is a shaping principle: It orders, influences, and determines the lives of individuals within the ebb and flow of social, political, historical, and linguistic factors, which in turn determine, and further constrain individual choices, decisions and values.

For Saussure a meaningful inquiry into the structure of the language of a culture must proceed with an inquiry into the *signs* of that language. For Saussure, the linguistic sign evokes an arbitrary association between a *signifier* (a sound or image) and a *signified* (a mental image, or its denotatum) of a *langue* (the abstract collective structure of a given language) distinct from a *parole* (idiosyncratic individualized utterances of langue) (Saussure, 1916:). There is neither such intrinsic value, for instance, in the English word *mother* to refer to the idea it denotes, nor in the case of the French *mère* or for its Latin equivalent *mater*. Saussure insists that this association ought to be seen as arbitrary. So, if I enunciate the nominal *fish*, what is

there in the internal structure of this word to link it to the ideation of the scaly piscine specie? Do the letters f+i+s+h in themselves constitute this concept? Is it not true that we have come to accept it as the sign, or as the linguistic value, or, better still, as the mental representation of the element? So I argue, along with the American social behaviorist George H. Mead, that "language is not ever arbitrary in the sense of simply denoting a bare state of consciousness by a word" (Mead, 1934: 75).

But *langue* becomes the locus of Saussure's object of study in, at least, two respects. First, *langue*, in his thought, is the universal principle that binds a homogeneous ethno linguistic society. A study of the signs of the language of a speech community, say French, then, is the study of its internal linguistic structures in terms of its meaning making processes, Saussure may argue. Second, a focus on *langue*, according to Saussure, is appropriate inasmuch as it lends itself to the discovery of universal linguistic principles and laws governing the linguistics of cultures, especially when pursued from a *synchronic* perspective; "By studying the properties of natural languages, their structure, and use, we may hope to gain some understanding of the specific characteristics of human intelligence" (Chomsky, 1975: 5). However, if the language of a people might be considered as structured instead of inchoate, why the same cannot be said for their society? In a way, Saussure's goal, I am inclined to think, was to understand the universal principles of language; he aimed at discovering the science of human communication in society: *semiology*.

### **3. Communicating in a Structuralist Society**

A global view of the semiology of human communication, to borrow from Saussure, calls to mind the constitutive processes by which communication manifests in society. According to John Dewey, communication is structural because it is the basis of communitarian societies (Dewey, 1992). In the thinking of Jürgen Habermas, a structured society creates "a network for communicating information and points of view" (Habermas, 1996: 360). And though Habermas writes within the context of public sphere, it is important to note that such points of view could consider inter alia issues of ideology, hegemony, class struggle, and power relationships. For this reason the works of Michel Foucault will remain seminal to the study of structuralism in modern society. With Foucault originates the concept of power, which creates an asymmetrical core/periphery structure. In his emblematic article where he developed the social theory of *Panopticism* (1975) Foucault argues that society has

been ordered in a manner that privileges an omnipresent surveillance of the periphery by the capitalist, upper class; The Panopticon machine constantly keeps its gaze on everyone unbeknown to them that they are being watched. Foucault writes: "He is seen, but he does not see; he is the object of information, never a subject in communication...The Panopticon is a machine for dissociating the see/being seen dyad" (Foucault, 1975: 182); Such an apparatus, then, results in dissymmetry, disequilibrium, and difference in a consciously hierarchized society. This system "constitutes a compact model of the disciplinary mechanism" (id.: 180). It is that which identifies, individuates, and determines the individual's station: No trespass.

For Foucault there are two basic ways of communicating with individuals in society to constantly exercise power over them. This can be achieved either by controlling their relationships, or by separating out the potentially dangerous elements amongst them. Segregation and differentiation are the main processes. Both means are implemented through a subtle coercion by which all authorities, the school, the prison, and the hospital exercise control over the individual by creating what Foucault calls a "binary division and branding" (ibid.: 181). According to this anti-rhizomatic (Deleuze & Guattari, 1980), one is either brilliant or dull (as in the case of the school), mad or insane (if one happens to be incarcerated in the four walls of the prison), normal or abnormal (so long as one happens to be a patient). So conceived, authorities reduce humans just to atomic particles so they could measure, supervise and correct them in an effort to maintain conformity, law, and order (In this way, all members of a society has been structured to so behave, and to act accordingly so that discipline becomes a component of our schemata. It is this hierarchization that, for instance:

creates disparities that continue to increase between the core and the periphery of the capitalist system, which led the economist Immanuel Wallerstein to say, in a dialogue with Braudel, that capitalism is "a creation of the inequality of the world" and that it can only be conceived in a vast and "universalist" space (Mattelart, 1996: 164).

With advances in science and technology, Foucault's Panoptism reverberates all the more. Our helpless detachment from the Internet, the cellular phone, and new communication technologies such as Twitter, Facebook, and YouTube further intensify the surveillance project so that it is difficult, if not impossible, to act unnoticed. I argue that such presence is itself destructive because it wrongfully interferes with the privacy of the masses. But what is there to be weary of if one is right before the law? Why should the hardened criminals not feel that they are under constant surveillance? Why should the guilty citizen, who just sped off pass the

traffic light, feel relieved? Does it not make sense to feel under pressure and insecure under such circumstances?

As if this capitalist project does not suffice, the masses have been further plunged in the abyss of excessive consumerism, of mass culture, and of neo-hedonism. Humanity's incessant but often bogus obsession with materialism attracts the attention of two of the Frankfurt School's influential thinkers: Theodor Adorno and Max Horkheimer (1944); the German authors focus on the sociopathologies that belie the structure of postmodern society vis-à-vis individual self-consciousness. In their critical theory of society, Adorno and Horkheimer argue that the belief that the fundamental structure of modern societies is reason needs reconsideration because it is "nothing but sheer illusion" against the backdrop of two seemingly senseless world wars (cited in Elliot, 2009: 21). The point is made that mass culture and the commercialization of almost every single atom of production in society have brought with them a kind of brainwashing and dependence on the media, Hollywood and the capitalist ideas of entrepreneurs. So construed, humans have become so consumed in the things they amass that they are shaped, defined and identified by them. In a consumerist culture, reason is the interpretation of what the individual possesses, rather than in terms of what they think about, or in terms of how that thinking is processed. In a sense then, the Cartesian maxim "cogito ergo sum" in today's rationality is less appealing than "consumo ergo sum". Adorno writes:

Today the culture industry has taken over the civilizing inheritance of the entrepreneurial and frontier democracy – whose appreciation of intellectual deviations was never very finely attuned. All are free to dance and enjoy themselves, just as they have been free, since the historical neutralization of religion, to join any of the innumerable sects. But freedom to choose an ideology – since ideology always reflects economic coercion – everywhere proves to be freedom to choose what is always the same." (Adorno, 1991: np)

At this point it is instructive to stress that the workings of capitalism through the instrumentality of the mass culture, and the mass media, coupled with the desire to consume en masse in modern society, leads to one thing, and yet dreadful: domination. Domination, in this scheme of things, also operates at least at two strata: the self and the socio-political. When the individual's self is dominated, and consequently subjugated, under the claws of a capitalist project, s/he is reduced to what Adorno describes as *psychological de-individualized social atoms* (Adorno, 1967). In this state, the individual mainly and regrettably develops a fetish for a high culture, the reality of which is illusory. This domination of the human sense of rationality, of the "human intelligence" (Chomsky, 1975), is what Adorno and Horkheimer

point to as the lot of an enlightened system. At the realm of politics, individuals are in a like manner conditioned through the presentation of the stimuli of the mass media to elicit responses of compliance, patriotism, and social order. However, is that how helpless the masses are, and have no control over the Id, to sound a bit Freudian? If the masses are so incapable of making rational, and sound judgment concerning matters of the polis (Lippman, 1922), what then is the basis of democratic states?

#### **4. Selfhood, the Public, and the Mass Media in a Structuralist Society**

Perhaps we could trace the roots of this problematic to the diminished authority of the father, head in the family system. In *Eros and Civilization* (1956), Herbert Marcuse reads political undertones into the cathartic nature of individual consciousness resulting from humankind's rationality outside the horde. Marcuse argues that the role of the father as the leader who instils ego in and represses the Id of the son is no longer functional in the current dispensation due to the father's latent and incapacitated roles in his household. His position as father is severely threatened as his children no longer look up to him for socialization and education, and rather turn to other agents such as peers, the school, the church, and of course the mass media. But there would have arisen no harm if there had been a positive impact on the rational mind. The point is made then that, when the instinctual drives of collective Ids do assemble in the public sphere or society, they are, in the process of time, given directions by the ego of a leader, although this leadership or these directions may not be as objectively conscientious to separate the good from the bad (Marcuse, 1956). In Marcuse's view, this kind of leadership results in the kind of fascist, communist, oligarchic, or totalitarian societies that have plagued the progress and the development of an ego-conscious civilized humanity. Marcuse regrets that this instinctual drive has conquered the reason-part of our being through the conscious manipulation of capitalist projects chief among which is the mass media, rather than having suppressed and sublime the Id of our human selves.

But if individuals tend to be driven more by passion than by reason, how do we then participate in rational public deliberations? For Jürgen Habermas, the public sphere is an institution that mediates social life and the State (Habermas, 1964). He insists that there can hardly be any public opinion without the public sphere, because it is the public sphere that guarantees access to all citizens. However, there can be no such thing at the public sphere without the public. Habermas believes that the public constitutes an assembly of rational

private individuals with the rights of freedom of assembly and of freedom of association; they are capable of expressing diverse opinions concerning both private and, for the most part, public affairs. Recent studies in the culture of self-expression in the electronic media in Ghana show that the right to free speech is sometimes, however, abused (Coker, 2011, 2012a, and 2012b).

Habermas makes a clear distinction between the media of the public sphere and the one of the political sphere. Although both could be said to play a complementary role in a liberal democracy, the former mainly refers to the various media, newspapers, radio, television and lately new communication technologies, by which information is transmitted to and influenced by target audiences in the large public body. Habermas also notes that the role of the press has undergone a serious transformation: it shifted from a role of forming public opinion to a role of expressing private sentiments. The political sphere, on the other hand, has to do with public discussions relatable to matters of the polis, or its administration. In a word, a study of the public sphere is a study of how the rational views of the masses are coordinated, regulated and dealt with within the atmosphere of democracy and of freedom of expression.

It is important to note that the term *public sphere* came into prominence not until the eighteenth century because of the functioning of the bourgeois society led by aristocrats, feudal lords, kings, and princes. It means that the act of expressing individual opinions were regulated, if not highly repressed, for it was these privileged few that had the imprimatur to do so, and to act in behalf of the public. There was a climate of repression and of silence because individuals' views and opinions were considered inchoate, prejudiced, and less important. On this note I wonder if Jürgen Habermas had come into contact with the work of Walter Lippmann, *Public Opinion* (1922), in which the latter argued that the views of the public are bogus to the running of the State because their views are steeped in stereotypes and false judgments of the real world.

Given the changing function of the media, Habermas criticizes the collapse of the private sphere and public sphere through what he terms "the refeudalization of society" because today there is hardly no distinction between the two (Habermas, 1964). Michel Foucault's concept of *Panopticism* neatly ties in here. For instance, everything one does in the privacy of its home is under the scrutiny of the public eye in this age. Habermas also has a word on the institution "public relations work": he says that they are all propagandists seeking to harmonize public opinion to prevent dissent and affront.

## 5. Functions of Question in Elicitation Strategies

In all, six main functions that questions perform as an elicitation strategy used by counsels during cross-examination were identified: constraining witness/defendant's responses, discrediting witnesses and their testimonies, luring defendants and witness, confusing defendants and witnesses, stamping counsels' authority and seeking confirmation to propositions by counsels.

In enacting power asymmetry in the courtroom, counsels try to control the type of responses they expect witnesses and defendants to give. In order to put tight reins on witnesses/defendants, counsels expect yes-no or short responses from them. The most potent weapon often used by counsels to achieve this feat includes question tag, yes-no questions and complex sentences. The use of yes-no questions to constrain the responses of defendants and witnesses is exemplified earlier in this paper, in Example (4). Owing to the coercive nature of this type of question, a narrow range of answers – either yes or no – is preferred. The following extracts which are follow-ups to Example (4) illustrate counsels' preference for yes-no responses from witness:

(9) C: *You are a very experienced agent so please tell the truth, now I repeat the question, that area inside the port are you telling this court that that place is earmarked by GHAPOHA for APS alone?*

R: *It is earmarked for delivery of truck and other moveable vehicles for handover to the respective agent for final delivery.*

(10) C: *I am putting it to you that your client imported the vehicle because he wants to sell the vehicle?*

R: *That is correct".*

(11) C: *Apart from APS are there other stevedore operators in the port?*

R: *Yes.*

(12) C: *And these other stevedore companies if they discharge vehicles they also use the same place?*

R: *Yes.*

(13) C: *From your experience is it that at any particular point in time you can have vehicles on that area having been discharged by different stevedore operators all put at that same area?*

W: *Yes.*



(Extracts 9 to 12 taken from HC 1; 12-3-2008)

The responses to Examples (5) and (9) flout the maxim of quantity which forbids speakers from giving more information than is required. In the cases under investigation, the witness intentionally opts out of observing the convention of courtroom discourse by indicating his unwillingness to cooperate, a situation that Grice (1975) and Fairclough (2001) refer to as resistance. The response to (10) is closer to what the counsel expects, but he is not yet satisfied and so several follow-up questions are asked until the defendant is coerced into giving “yes” responses which finally satisfies the counsel. From the interaction between the counsel and the witness, it is clear that by asking a yes-no question in Example (5), the counsel expected a “yes” to his question and since such an answer was not forthcoming, he persisted by repeating the question. Similarly, the preferred answer to question (9) was not given and so, the counsel, becoming slightly agitated repeated the question but this time used a stronger wording in Example (10): *“I am putting it to you that your client imported the vehicle because he wants to sell the vehicle?”* And the response is *“That is correct”*. Still hoping to get the preferred answer, the counsel gives a follow-up to the last question to elicit the preferred response. Repetition and reframing of the question several times is an indication of power and dominance. By reframing the question the counsel gets the witness to give the preferred answer, thus confirming Richman’s (2002) assertion that the counsel makes the witness go back over some of the terrain covered during direct examination, forcing the witness to concede “facts” inconsistent with the previous narrative.

Question tags were also used to constrain respondents’ responses, as shown in Example 14 below.

- (14) Q: *She was on her way to the farm when you assaulted her, wasn't she?*  
R: *No. (HC3; 29-10-2009).*

In the example above, the counsel manipulates the witness’s response through the statement that preceded the tag; and as can be seen, the response is simply “no”. Example (14) shows how the counsel tries to constrain the defendant’s contribution by way of direct attack *“She was on her way to the farm when you assaulted her”* then he asked for confirmation *“wasn't she?”* Here, the counsel displays power and authority to make the witness accept the meaning in the declarative. Whichever way the defendant answers the question constrains the defendant and puts the defendant in an awkward position. A “yes” or “no” answer does not

absolve the defendant of wrongdoing because the presupposition is incriminating in each answer. If the defendant answers 'yes', it presupposes he assaulted the victim on her way to the farm. If he answers 'no', that presupposes he assaulted her, but possibly not on her way to the farm. The deliberate violation of the maxim of manner in the way the question is framed constrains the witness from engaging in any lengthy narrative that will give the defendant room to present his thoughts extensively and consequently absolve himself.

One other function that the questions, used as elicitation strategies, perform is that of discrediting the witness so that his or her testimonies will not be looked upon favourably by the judge. Counsels often do this through the use of questions that are cloaked as complex sentence patterns, heavily-laden with embedded clauses such that the witness or defendant loses focus of the information elicited. For example:

(15) *Q: Is it not true that the first day that you gave evidence you told the court that the accused brought to you a copy of a document showing the name Baffour Appiah as the owner of the land*

A look at the complex subordination in the example shows how confusing the utterance can be to a witness or defendant in a courtroom interaction.

Another function of elicitation questions is using cognitive manipulation to extract information from defendants or witnesses. In the data, there was subtle use of ideology where counsels tried to elicit preferred responses from witness through deception. When counsels are confronted with hostile witnesses or defendants and it is obvious that these may refuse to cooperate, they tend to resort to cognitive manipulation to obtain their preferred responses. They lure witnesses/defendants to confession. In the data, this function was executed when the counsel tried to be friendly and spoke in a manner devoid of accusation as exemplified below:

(16) *C: So after that meeting, after you had accepted that monies had been mistakenly paid, you then like a true Christian wrote to the bank admitting that and proposing a payment plan? (COC, BFS 292/08).*

In such situations, counsels feign friendship with the defendant/witness and try to win his or her trust, a strategy that has the potential to make the witness/defendant lose guard. In Example (33), for instance, the counsel interacted with the defendant like a friend and downplayed his guilt by reminding him of being a true Christian, before framing the question

in a declarative form. This, no doubt, might have had a soothing effect on the defendant who not being aware that the counsel is trying to lure him to give a confession falls into the counsel's trap. The defendant here might not be aware of the counsel's motive otherwise he would refuse to cooperate with him, thereby breaking the chain or power inequality. Indeed, Fairclough (2001) maintains that "if one becomes aware that a particular aspect of common sense is sustaining power inequalities at one's own expense, it ceases to be common sense and may cease to have capacity to sustain power inequalities i.e. to function ideologically" (p.71). If defendants and witnesses know where a seemingly harmless conversation with the opposing counsel will lead them, they will be on their guard.

Example (16) may give one the impression that the counsel is just passing a comment but in actual fact, the counsel is manipulating the defendant into incriminating himself. Information that is provided by counsels during cross-examination may appear to be devoid of the aggression and force which often characterize assertions and accusations, but may be equally devastating. This is because it may be difficult for a witness or defendant to determine the extent to which cross-examination could go. Such cross-examination is described by a respondent as 'cross-examination being at large' (Personal Interview, 2011). He asserts that it is difficult for a witness to know where a counsel may be heading during cross-examination. Wodak (1987) confirms this view when she argues that recipients of manipulation are unable to understand the real intentions or to see the full consequences of the beliefs or actions advocated by the manipulator, especially when the recipients lack the specific knowledge used to resist manipulation. Such manipulation is ideological and power-related.

## **5. Beyond Structuralism: Africa on the Spotlight**

The above discussion even becomes poignant from the standpoint of postcolonial theorists. In a postmodern society, it is important to note that the notion of structuralism will certainly have its own limits I have already demonstrated. Frantz Fanon's "The Fact of Blackness" (1952) is one such example. I admit that the reading of the chauvinism against the black race in the eyes of a black man is not an easy task, though I refuse to be tempted to act blindly in defense of my race. I should say, at the outset, that the plight of the "Negro", as they were called few decades ago, is an intriguingly perplexing oxymoron. Frantz Fanon's work is yet another gory depiction of the pain of being perhaps mistakenly born black in a world in

which order, progress and rationality is defined by those who believe they have been ordained by the heavens to govern the Earth: a certain manifest destiny.

It makes little sense to regurgitate the ontology of black people. The point is that the metaphoric furnace black Others are thrown into stems from primordial stereotypes and prejudices (Fanon, 1952). In *Public Opinion* (1922), the revered and perceptive American writer, Walter Lippman, says that stereotypes thrive on the economy of thought and effort, and that they are useful for preventing the human mind to think beyond itself. This motif is also repeated by the French thinker Jacques Ellul in *Propaganda: The Formation of Men's Attitudes* (1965). I will make no repeat of the historico-racial or epidermal/corporeal racial schema and molds, to which the Black is made to respond, though it is sometimes arduous to think outside of these labels. One of the worst results of stereotypes and prejudices of racism -Including anti-Semitism - Is the acceptance of those charges and descriptors levelled against the Other. But who is to blame?

. As an academic, I went there to fully appreciate the plight of being an African rather than because I love my roots. My sense of being is deeply challenged by the paradoxes of progress versus development, patriotism versus self-accomplishment, and knowledge versus tradition. In the midst of this labyrinth, thinking White leads to your doom, I suppose. You are not white. It is a kind of "autism in the West" such that you will neither be fully accepted back at home, nor be listened to in the white man's land. Should we wither? Such, I believe, are the issues we should consider in these pressing days, and not necessarily the idealization of racial discourses, the tendencies of which are divisive and regrettably derisive.

But who is to blame I repeat? Of course we would reminisce the grandeur of the Black in great civilizations such as the Empire of Egypt, or the massive kingdoms of Songhai, of Mali, and of Ghana. Of course it is easy to point accusing fingers at He who "wants the world; he wants it for himself alone. He finds himself predestined master of this world and him. He enslaves it. An acquisitive relation is established between the world and him" (Fanon, 1952: 73). I do not in any way seem to sound judgmental, nor wish to say that we have no cause to rethink the hermeneutics of our present degeneration. All I am asking is the stoppage of this pseudo-demagoguery, of this self-pity, and of this self-hate. Speaking of our conditions in these terms is the rumination of our lost glitter.

But who is to blame when, for instance, all efforts by the last Jeremiahs of our epochs are compromised by the thousands of Tobiahs and Sanballats? Who is to blame when we valorize today the glorification of the Id over against the Ego? How many companies sponsor and support education-driven programs in Africa? Or maybe I am out of touch with reality to

think so, that it is the age of edutainment. Edutainment, and whatever it is, indeed! Who is to blame when all what we seem to be doing is to apply models of development we have little contributed to? Do we also need to put up skyscrapers as an index of our progress in Sub-Saharan Africa? Why should we have to read Shakespeare or Aristotle, and not Soyinka or Mbiti? If Jacques Ellul's maxim of "think globally, act locally" is true, then, we would need to rethink our educational system. As academics, we cite others, and yet we are never acknowledged. We confirm the theories and the conceptual frameworks of great minds in the West, but we are little heard of. As it stands, our education is overtly Euro-centric, and covertly Afro-tropic. It is a workshop for Anglo-American capitalist forces, but one that is hardly responsive and responsible to its own people. Pardon me if I sound offensive!

Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o makes similar observations. In *Moving the Centre*, Ngũgĩ offers a fresh reading of imperialism in the "Third" World (Ngũgĩ, 1993). According to him, imperialism today can be felt at a much more heightened stage through the mechanisms of neo-colonialism and the leading role of the United States. For him, the main *telos* of colonialism, and now of neo-colonialism, is to gain "complete ownership of, management and control of the entire system of production, exchange and distribution of the wealth in its home base and those of other nations and territories" (Ngũgĩ, 1993: 50). It also aims to overcome increasing demands for social change in neo-colonies by dividing, weakening, and countering any form of resistance. Are not the case of the Arab Spring and of the dog-like decapitation of Gaddafi disturbing reconnaissances?

Ngũgĩ points out that, in the old regime, this form of greed which the imperial powers of the West courted was made manifest by their forceful occupation of the means of production in the conquered colonies. In Ghana, the colonial project officially commenced in March 1884 after the end of the tedious struggles between the English and the fragmented, and less technologically sophisticated kingdoms of the Gold Coast. A similar story is told of the occupation of South America by the United States following the retreat of European powers such as Spain and Portugal, through evasion rather than intervention. Such occupation is clearly depicted in Armand Mattelart's *The Invention of Communication*, in which the author argues that the main motive behind this evasion was to gain access to the means of production in that region (Mattelart, 1996). This plunder for wealth and materialism continued on a global scale until the end of the Second World War.

But despite the political freedom gained by colonies from the West, the imperial claws can still be felt, and they are the essence of neo-colonialism. The problem with the fight against neo-colonialism, which Ghana's first president perhaps failed to acknowledge in his effort to

unify Africa, is that it is an ideological battle. According to Ngũgĩ, this project has been systematic, self-sustaining, and totalizing, encompassing all arenas of life. Neo-colonialism thrives on cultural hegemonies and prejudices. A certain conditioning as inferior has been established in the consciousness of citizens in Third World Countries through mediums such as the colonial educational system (the school), religion (or rather through the Church), and the mass media of communication, whether print, electronic, or computer-mediated. This mithridatization (Ellul, 1965) implies that poor nations have been made to not wholly accept a propagandized state of affairs, and, more importantly, that they articulate and use it as a part of their national discourses, identities, and body politics (see also Coker, 2013). For Ngũgĩ, the negative effects of "cultural control" in neo-colonized states are beyond measure: they have affected signifiers such as "the entire system of education, language and language use, literature, religion, the media", which have resulted in "the transmission of a certain ideology, set of values, outlook, attitudes, feelings etc., and hence power over the whole area of consciousness" (Ngũgĩ, 1993: 51).

What should we expect from those whom Ngũgĩ calls "fake freedom fighters" in the context of Africa, for instance, when they were made to read Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*, William Golding's *Lord of the Flies*, or Daniel Defoe's *Robinson Crusoe*? History has shown us quite graphically, how ersatz it is to build on structures we have no part in. The whole world is amazed about how a country such as Ivory Coast could at a go crawl on its belly just like that after three decades of an unprecedented economic growth in the furnace of economic turmoil West Africa finds itself.

So grave are the ills of neo-colonialism that, today, at least in certain quarters of West Africa, young men refer in Akan to the ladies they are enamored of as their "obronis" (White mistresses) regardless of the glaring skin pigmentation of these ladies. So goes the old myth that one not needs to further their journey to the chapel if on their way they meet the White man: they may as well return home; They have seen God himself! Another cultural element is the African onomastics. Not too long ago, both the Church, and its missionary schools - whether Catholic, Anglican, Basel or Wesleyan - required of all Ghanaians to bear Christian names, and by that it meant European names. For example Kwame Nkrumah was originally called Francis Nkrumah. So totalizing was the brainwashing that purely indigenous, local names underwent morphemic and semantic engineering. Interestingly, anyone who bore the Fante name Kuntu, which when translated means "blanket", was christened Blankson at church or at school, presumably "son of Kuntu". But this is not too easy to let go as this translation could equally mean "son of the blanket". I know such semantic extension of Mr. Wood, Miss

Fish, or Sir Bird could have caused that influence. But in Africa in general, and in Ghana in particular, the naming system is a principle of the continuity, of the metaphysics, of the ontology, and of the value systems of clans, and of societies. Similarly, "Andah" became Anderson, henceforth "Kumi" became Koomson. Again, so totalizing is the brainwashing that "made in Africa" goods are seen as inferior to Anglo-American, and currently Chinese, products. It is felt everywhere: in our foods, our music, our dressing, our language, our everything!

But Ngũgĩ is not a pessimist. He ends on the note that there are brilliant attempts by a third group of countries in the Third World to cause social transformation as opposed to others, who gleefully lean on the old ways of thinking and acting. I wonder whether Nigeria, Ivory Coast, and, of course, Ghana, could be found in this circle of optimists. As the champion of this crusade, Kwame Nkrumah on March 6, 1957 prayed, "The independence of Ghana is meaningless unless it is linked up to the total liberation of the African continent" ).

## **7. Conclusion (please shift this to the next page)**

By way of summary, I have sought to demonstrate the relevance of structuralism as it held sway in linguistics and communication to the systematic study of modern societies. Language, and I mean communication, and society are comparable to the obverse and converse sides of the coin. One of the sides does not preclude the other. A final observation to make is that the structuralist paradigm to the study of society allows us to see in great detail the position of the self and of their consciousness in relation to hegemonic and power dominance over us. Structure is the system. It is the thing itself tout court.

## **References**

Adorno, T. (1967): "Sociology and psychology", *New Left Review* 46: 67-80.

Adorno, T. W. & Horkheimer, M. (1944): *Dialectic of Enlightenment*. New York: The Continuum Publishing Corporation.

Aitchison, J. (2001): *Language Change: Progress or Decay*. (3<sup>rd</sup> ed). Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

- Berger, P. L. & Luckmann, T. (1966): *The Social Construction of Reality: A Treatise in the Sociology of Knowledge*. New York: Anchor.
- Carey, J. (1982): "The Mass Media and Critical Theory: An American View", *Communication Yearbook* 5: 18-33.
- Chomsky, N. (1975): *Reflections on Language*. New York: Pantheon.
- Coker, W. (2013) "Public Opinion and Propaganda in 20<sup>th</sup> Century America: The Case of the Lippmann/Dewey Debate", *Journal of Society and Communication*: 84-108.
- Coker, W. (2012a): "Mobile Communication and the Culture of Self-Expression: The Case of SMSing to Radio in Ghana", *Journal of Media and Communication Studies* 4(6): 123-133.
- Coker, W. (2012b): "Com:plaint Strategies of SMS Texts in the Context of Radio Panel Discussions in Ghana", in D. F. Edu-Buandoh & A. Appartaim (eds.): *Festschrift in Honour of Professor K. E. Yankson*. Cape Coast: University of Cape Coast Press: 215-226.
- Coker, W. (2011): "Freedom of Speech and the Discourse of Flaming in Ghana: Evidence from Radio Panel Discussions", *Abibisem: Journal of African Culture and Civilization* 4: 83-96.
- Deleuze, G. & Guattari, F. (1980): *A Thousand Plateaus*. Trans. B. Massumi. New York: Continuum.
- Dewey, J. (1992): "On Discovering Communication: Pragmatism and the Pursuit of Social Criticism", in H. Hart (ed.): *Critical Communication Studies: Communication History & Theory in America*. New York: Routledge: .
- Elliott, A. (2009): *Contemporary Social Theory*. London & New York: Routledge.
- Ellul, J. (1965): *Propaganda: The Formation of Men's Attitudes*. New York: Vintage.
- Fanon, F. (1952): "The Fact of Blackness", in N. Badmington & J. Thomas (eds.) (2008): *The Routledge Critical and Cultural Theory Reader*. London: Routledge 316-48
- Foucault, M. (1975): *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison*. New York: Random House.
- Habermas, J. (1996): *Between Facts and Norms: Contributions to a Discourse Theory of Law and Democracy*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.
- Habermas, J. (1964): "The Public Sphere: An Encyclopedic Article", *New German Critique* 3: 49-55.
- Levi Strauss, C. (1958): *Structural Anthropology*. Allen Lane: The Penguin Press.
- Lippman, W. (1922): *Public Opinion*. Charlottesville: MacMillan.
- Marcuse, H. (1956): *Eros and Civilization*. New York: Vintage Books.
- Mattelart, A. (1996): *The Invention of Communication*. London & Minneapolis: University of Minneapolis Press.



- Mead, G. H. (1934): *Mind, Self, and Society from the Standpoint of a Social Behaviorist*. Chicago & London: The University of Chicago Press.
- Ngũgĩ, W. T. (1993): *Moving the Centre: The Struggle for Cultural Freedoms*. Nairobi: EAEP.
- Nkrumah, K. (1957): Ghana's independence speech <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=AUVLbMwQZYM>. 03/01/2014.
- Saussure, F. (1916): *Course in General Linguistics*. Paris: Open Court.
- Yule, G. (1996): *The Study of Language*. (2<sup>nd</sup> ed.). Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

**The author:**

**Wincharles Coker** is currently a doctoral student of Michigan Tech's Rhetoric and Technical Communication, where he also teaches composition. He holds a Master of Philosophy degree in English and Linguistics from the University of Cape Coast, Ghana, where he is a lecturer at the Department of Communication Studies. Since his graduation in 2011, he has developed keen interest regarding the following issues: affective communication, the interface between plebiscitary discourse and mass communication, new media, and critical discourse studies and rhetoric. His recent works have appeared in *Media Dialogues*, *Journal of Society and Communication*, *Mass Communicator*, and *Journal of Media and Communication Studies*.