

Language and Violence

Pragmatic perspectives

EDITED BY

Daniel Silva



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This book combines scholarship in pragmatics, linguistic anthropology, and philosophy to address the problem of violence in language. How do words wound? What is the relation between physical and linguistic violence? How do racial invectives, misogynous language, homophobic slurs, among other forms of hate speech, affect the body and make us vulnerable to conditions of injurability that language brings about? While investigating the limits that violence poses for everyday speech action, understanding, representation, and our shared frameworks of intelligibility, this collective volume theoretically bridges knowledge from canons in linguistic pragmatics, continental philosophy and linguistic/semiotic anthropology and the dialogic perspective of subjects who are located in the peripheries of South America and Europe. The scholarship gathered here intends to offer a perspective on the violence of words that is attentive to practices and sensibilities that do not always fit into hegemonic ideologies of self and language.

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Language and Violence

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Investigating violence in language

An introduction

Daniel Silva

1. Why pairing violence and language?

Violence is a ubiquitous problem in social life. When troubled by the risks and limits of the destructive potential of individuals and social groups, scientists and lay people alike may provide different explanations for the causes, the features and the productivity of the various forms that injury, conflict and pain may assume in everyday life. Although the talk of experts and laypeople about violence might be radically distinct, the motivations animating both seem to coincide in the acknowledgement that violence is pervasive in – for some, constitutive of – human life.

Violence is as much part of our human condition as peaceful cooperative action is. Yet regardless of it being basic in the human condition, violence is a disconcerting concept. Its manifestations are usually destructive. As victims of racism, misogyny or homophobia commonly report, being violated by words or physical acts is an experience that may make us feel disoriented (see Butler 1997, Lawrence 1990, Santos Allen, this volume, Goldstein, this volume). In our engagement with others, being able to orient ourselves to spatial and cultural coordinates is fundamental for our communicative practice in the world. In his practice approach to language, William Hanks (1996, 229) argues that sharing the same grammar is less a pre-requisite for communication between two people than the “ability to orient themselves verbally, perceptually, and physically to each other and to their social world.” Fundamental to this view of situational co-engagement is the notion of “context”: a social field “in which agents (individual or collective) engage,” to which they bring their histories and “through which various forms of value or ‘capital’ circulate” (Hanks 2005, 192).

However, as many chapters below demonstrate, violence in language tends to obliterate precisely the contexts that undergird meaning-making, mutual intelligibility, and engagement. Judith Butler (1997, 4) claims that “[t]o be injured by speech is to suffer a loss of context, that is, not to know where you are.” Violence thus tends to affect contextual orientation, one of the basic resources for our living in a world with others. Butler adds that the disconcertment provoked by violent acts lies in a temporary inability that is produced at the moment of injury itself:

The capacity to circumscribe the situation of the speech act is jeopardized at the moment of injurious address. To be addressed injuriously is not only to be open to an unknown future, but not to know the time and place of injury, and to suffer the disorientation of one's situation as the effect of such speech. Exposed at the moment of such a shattering is precisely the volatility of one's "place" within the community of speakers; one can be "put in one's place" by such speech, but such a place may be no place. (Butler 1997, 4)

In spite of these experiences of disorientation and vulnerability that accompany violent acts, attempting to understand violence and how it relates to language may provide us with some important resources for comprehending the complex entanglements between violence, signification and social life, and especially how subjects in situations of violence and conflict may strive to overcome the injury by reorienting their course of action in the world. Based on empirical and theoretical evidence from subjects who are situated in the periphery of current geopolitical arrangements (people from a different span of class, race and gender in Brazil; women who move between Brazil, Peru and Bolivia; soccer fans and police officers in Argentina; Muslims in the Netherlands), this book is an interdisciplinary attempt of entangling scholarship on physical and symbolic violence in the margins of the world with some canons in linguistic pragmatics, continental philosophy, and linguistic/semiotic anthropology.

As I discuss below, historically, linguistic and pragmatic theories from the center – i.e., the Western liberal world – have tended to address language use as cooperative action, geared at reciprocally informative polite understanding. Silvana Borutti (1984) provided a pioneering critique of the conceptual vocabulary in early pragmatic theories. Even though Borutti was not tackling the neglect of non-Western sensibilities in the production of idealized Eurocentric models of languages and speakers, she pointed to the idealization underlying such notions as the discursive situation and the speaking subject: "The former is considered as communicative 'flow' directed towards an increase in information. The latter is considered as a perfectly equilibrated and self-conscious individual subject who aims to make his or her presuppositions and conversational goals completely clear" (p. 439–440). While this model of communication and individuals may partially capture the realities of certain communities – for instance, Habermas' bourgeois public sphere, Chomsky's ideal speaker –, it does not do justice to many others, especially those outside Europe in the postcolonial world, as well as the marginalized minorities inside Europe. Situated in these peripheries, the speaking subjects with whom we engage here cannot afford a transactional model of communicative flow aimed at least cost with the most benefit, much less an image of transparency of intentions and bounded individuality (see Section 4 below). In light of the lived realities of trafficked women along a transnational road in South America, soccer fans in conflict with the police in Buenos Aires, youths dismissed by police officers

as not partaking in a shared world in São Paulo, Muslims injuriously framed by islamophobic discourse in the Netherlands, among other subjects we converse with in this book, both the conflictive character of society and the pervasiveness of violence in language use become visible.

To put our main rationale in simple terms, this book takes verbal violence to be as much violence as physical violence, and not just “mere words”. Consider, for instance, the problem of racial invectives. In his groundbreaking critique of controversies over speech regulations on North American university campuses, Charles Lawrence Jr. (1990) comments that face-to-face racial insults have an immediate injurious impact on the victim. The author points to two different dimensions that cause racist, homophobic and other injurious speech to act as a blow on the victim’s body. Temporally, racial invectives condense a long historicity of unequal forms of address and distribution of wellbeing; somatically, they strike the body, harming a corporeal and psychic structure of affects that had been formed and sustained in linguistic practices. In his own words: “Assaultive racist speech functions as a preemptive strike. The racial invective is experienced as a blow, not a proffered idea, and once the blow is struck, it is unlikely that dialogue will follow. Racial insults are undeserving of first amendment protection because the perpetrator’s intention is not to discover truth or initiate dialogue but to injure the victim” (Lawrence 1990, 452).

In Lawrence’s positioning of racial invectives as “preemptive strikes”, it follows that injurious speech affects the body both temporally (i.e. preempting further dialogue) and somatically (i.e. striking for the sake of injuring). Furthermore, along his lines, injurious speech and verbal violence involve forms of inequality – racial slurs harm the body because they draw from inequalities that were generated and sustained before the injurious scene itself. In this sense, this book approaches verbal violence from a perspective that is vigilant to inequality. With sociologist Boaventura dos Santos (2016, 228), we believe that “a postcolonial perspective” would be suitable to this goal in that it “draws on the idea that the structures of power and knowledge are more visible from the margins.”¹

1. In this volume, Joana Pinto engages more closely with Boaventura de Sousa Santos’ proposal of expanding science by listening to the periphery, or in his terms to the epistemologies from the South. ‘Abyssal thinking’ is the term that Santos applies to the colonial neglect, within Western theorizations, of non-Western sensibilities and epistemologies. Characteristic of hegemonies in the West, this mode of thinking usually draws an abyssal line between (former) metropolitan and colonial societies. Within abyssal thinking, the knowledges of ex-colonized people and their multiple cultures and epistemologies are often reduced “to expressions of irrationality, of superstition or, at best, to practical and local forms of knowledge whose relevance [ought to be] dependent on their subordination to modern science, perceived as the sole source of true knowledge” (Santos, Nunes and Meneses 2007, xxxiii). An alternative to abyssal thinking and its Manichaeic mode of regimenting knowledge is a perspective that acknowledges the epistemological diversity in the world.

As I further specify in Section 4, our stance in reading some tenets of pragmatics directly emerges from the fact that we are dealing with postcolonial peripheries – cultural and geographical locations in South America and Europe which have been affected by either the former colonial exploitation of land outside Europe and its accompanying transatlantic trade of humans or by the present-day growing racism against Muslims, many of whom are immigrants of former European colonies. In their proposal of a postcolonial pragmatics, Anchimbe and Janney (2011, 1451) remind us that speech communities in the postcolonial world – countries artificially created by current colonial rule and former European colonies – are marked “by social, economic, and political inequities and tensions exacerbated by their colonial histories” and “constitute uniquely complex, hybridic communication environments that differ markedly from the kinds of social environments generally studied in pragmatics”.

Thus to engage in a dialogue with practices and sensibilities that do not necessarily fit into Eurocentric ideologies of self and language, we embrace in this book a perspective in pragmatics that acknowledges the epistemological diversity of the world. Assuming that pragmatics is an interdisciplinary perspective on the study of language (Verschueren 1999), linguists and anthropologists gather in this volume to tackle the problem of violence in language by engaging with knowledges and practices from the margins of the world.

2. Violence and the limits of signification

I would like to single out the problem of violence in language by posing a first question that is commonly raised in the scholarship on language and violence. It is not uncommon to read in both academic and non-academic accounts of violence that, when faced with the latter, “we reach some kind of limit in relation to the capacity to represent” (Das 2007, 79; see also Butler 1997, Scarry 1985, Briggs 2007a, Seligmann-Silva 2005, Daniel 1996, 1998). Addressing this limit of signification is a challenge, perhaps a duty, for any theorization on violence in language. In order to pave the way for a discussion on possible ways of approaching the relation between violence and language (see Section 3), I will comment on three accounts of this liminal space. In their different ways, Noam Chomsky, Primo Levi and Veena Das write about language reaching a limit respectively in the bombing of Hiroshima, the concentration camps in World War II, and the Partition in India.

Noam Chomsky narrates that when Hiroshima was bombed, he “literally couldn’t talk to anybody” (cited in Cogswell 1996, 14). The violence of the event was so extreme that, for a while, two of our most basic capacities as humans, namely sociality and language, failed him: “I just walked off by myself. I was at a summer

camp at the time, and I walked off into the woods and stayed alone for a couple of hours when I heard about it. I could never talk to anyone about it and never understood anyone's reaction. I felt completely isolated." (p. 14). In cases of traumatic violence, this sense of momentary isolation and speechlessness may last longer, perhaps a lifetime. Primo Levi, a survivor of the Holocaust, described that the camp was such a horrific laboratory as to prove that "in the face of necessity [*bisogno*] and nagging physical discomfort [*disagio fisico assillanti*], many habits and social instincts are reduced to silence" (1987, 94). One of the figures that most suffered under such silence was the Muselmann. In the myriad terms describing the social hierarchies that emerged among prisoners of the Nazi concentration camps, Levi explains that 'Muselmann' was a jargon deployed by the camp veterans to designate "the weak, the inept, those destined to 'selection'". While violence was experienced by everyone in the camps, the Muselmann was the prototypic and extreme figure of an apathetic, mute and lonely being whose social and linguistic bonds were completely withdrawn by violence. Writing about the aftermath of the violent Partition of India and the 1984 anti-Sikh riots, Veena Das (2007) provides an example of collective linguistic disarticulation caused by violence. The riots during the Partition of India in 1947 engendered such traumatic violence that the experience of numerous families who were displaced seemed to "have been frozen" (p. 88). The violence of the Partition was so "unimaginable" and "unsayable" that it did not seem to find any linguistic expression – or no form of life in Wittgenstein's (1953) sense – within the pragmatics of Indian social life:

Men beat up their wives, commit sexual aggression, shame them in their own self-creations of masculinity – but such aggression is still "sayable" in Punjabi life through various kinds of performative gestures and through storytelling. Contrast this with the fantastic violence in which women were stripped and marched naked in the streets, or the magnitude involved, or the fantasy of writing political slogans on the private parts of women. This production of bodies through a violence that was seen to tear apart the very fabric of life was such that claims over culture through disputation became impossible. (Das 2007, 89)

Veena Das thus suggests that certain forms of violence may be able to disrupt the very frameworks of intelligibility on which human life is grounded. Disputations over the semantics or the pragmatics of terms about aggression simply could not take place anymore or *no longer made sense* within the former network of sociabilities because violence tore apart "the very fabric of life." For those Indians afflicted by such traumatic events, humanity itself was no longer an ontological precondition: "Was it a man or a machine that plunged a knife into the private parts of a woman after raping her? Were those men or animals that went around killing and collecting castrated penises as signs of their prowess?" (p. 90). Among the narratives that Das

collects in her fieldwork we find that of Manjit, a woman who had been abducted and raped during the Partition and who would later suffer abuse by her future husband and husband's mother. Manjit's recounting of the traumatic events – like those of many other women who suffered abduction and rape in the Partition – seems to be one in which “all authorship is lost” (p. 87). Das unambiguously renders her inability to make sense of the violent episodes during the Partition as resulting from a violence-related “failure of grammar” (p. 8). Das writes, “one may say that her capacity to engage in everyday life was directly related to the fact that as far as the events of the Partition were concerned, language just left her.” (p. 91).

These three accounts differently build on the notion that extreme violence may render us mute and inarticulate; it may also destroy complete frameworks of signification. Scholars studying emotions arrive at similar conclusions with regard to strong emotions. As neurologist Antonio Damasio has extensively documented in his studies on the relationship between emotions and rational decision-making, excessive emotion (as well as the absence of it in cases of brain damage) is “prejudicial for rationality” (Damasio 1999, 41). In social psychology, Stuart Sutherland (1992, 1716) argues that people under the influence of strong emotion “can be driven to irrational thought and action”. Philosopher Sara Ahmed (2004) posits that in their social and political dissemination, affects like hate and fear may shatter entire frameworks of intelligibility.

Because our language use and the very frameworks on which this use is grounded are vulnerable to violence, conflict and excessive emotion, inquiring into this vulnerability may shed light on a problem that Goffman rigorously pursued throughout his career, namely the “struggle to achieve that apparently effortless sociability.” (Berger 1986, xii) Yet embracing this task may confront us with challenges. As scholars of language, how can we write an account of the situations in which language seems to leave us? How can we systematically engage with violence, that which Jean-Luc Nancy (2005, 16) casts as remaining foreign to any “energetic system into which it intervenes”? Trained as we are to describe modes of interaction and collective orientation in the world, which collectively constructed register and genre should we deploy to understand something that “is not the application of a force in conjunction with others, but the forcing open of the whole relation of forces, destroying it for the sake of destroying it” (p. 17)? As practitioners of a science that inquires into rules of sociability, how can we face a concept that neither “participate[s] in any order of reasons” nor “any sets of forces oriented towards results” (p. 17)?

This book is a collective attempt at grappling with these questions. Here, linguists and anthropologists gather to discuss not only the destructive potential of violence for shattering experience and language, but also its productive potential for making language itself violent in its own use and circulation. In the following

accounts of the relationship between violence and language, we shall see that violence raises problems for the ways we use words (i.e., for pragmatics) as well as for the social imaginations and regimentations of the way we use words (i.e., for metapragmatics).

3. Violence and conflict as loci of theorization about language

The relationship between violence and meaning may be seen from at least three perspectives. First, as the disconcerting episodes narrated by Chomsky, Levi and Das suggest, violence affects meaning by either making people temporarily silent and flustered or by disrupting an entire framework of signification (as implicated in the violence of India's Partition). Especially fruitful in anthropology, this perspective positions violence as disruptive of meaning (see e.g. Girard 1972, Scarry 1985, Caldeira 2000). Second, as demonstrated by the chapters that compose the Part II of this book, more than disrupting meaning, violence itself may be inflicted by utterances. In this perspective, meaning itself can be violent. In differently exploiting language resources to create inequality, racist invectives, misogynistic language, homophobic slurs and hate speech often affect the subject in bodily ways. Judith Butler quotes Charles R. Lawrence III, for whom racist speech "is like receiving a slap in the face. The injury is instantaneous" (cited in Butler 1997, 4). Third, both violence as disruption of meaning (perspective 1) and violence in meaning (perspective 2) produce effects. As is envisioned by the Lewis and Bastos' engagement with Caldeira's (2000) talk of crime, and by Galdeano's, Silva's and Leezenberg's discussion of Butler's (1997) iterability and Briggs' (2005) communicability, the circulation of stories about crime or the circulation of hate in stories make violence proliferate. To use Derrida's (1988) reading of Austin's (1962) performatives, in order to produce its effects injuriously, violence in language requires motion. While moving across social spaces, it needs to be recognizable as a token and reiterate previous injurious uses; it has to repeat rituals and simultaneously disrupt them; it must extract its force from history and disguise the extraction process altogether.

While engaging more closely with the second and third perspectives mentioned above, this book takes violence to be a productive avenue of studying language. Its chapters tackle the ways in which everyday violence – either produced in violent episodes, or in violent words, or even in violent theories – is entangled with the problem of signification. Together with contemporary efforts in contemporary pragmatics such as the creation of the *Journal of Language Aggression and Conflict* and the establishing of a field of research on impoliteness, we attempt to recruit knowledge in pragmatics for making sense of violent and uncooperative language.

Yet as Culpepper (2011) reminds us, recruiting the canons of linguistic thinking to account for conflictive communication requires a great deal of rethinking. Pragmatics has traditionally favored attention to harmonious or cooperative interactions. In its foundation as a discipline (Haberland and Mey 1977, Levinson 1983) in the late 1970s, pragmatics used to cast conflict and violence as marginal phenomena, with no heuristic value for explanations of meaning. In one of the founding works of linguistic pragmatics, Geoffrey Leech (1983, 105) very emphatically claimed that “conflictive illocutions tend, thankfully, to be rather marginal to human linguistic behavior in normal circumstances”.

This situation has changed over the past two decades, but the avenue is still being paved. In the field of research on politeness, for instance, it was only in the first decade of this century that a body of research was able to establish an agenda geared to impoliteness – i.e., to the use of language aimed at causing offense and harm to the interlocutor (e.g., Bousfield 2008, Bousfield and Culpepper 2008, Bousfield and Locher 2008). Looking back at the origins of politeness theory, Culpepper (2011, 6) comments that classic texts like Brown and Levinson (1987) and Leech (1983) gave “the impression that impoliteness is either some kind of pragmatic failure, a consequence of not doing something, or merely anomalous behavior, not worthy of consideration.” In this book, in spite of treating verbal aggression from a different perspective than the field of (im)politeness, we shall demonstrate that the use of language to do harm and hurt the Other is rather regular and ordinary, and as such requires critical and systematic attention.

Given our postcolonial stance in pragmatics, in the next section I will critically engage with some of the dominant principles we received, many of which position violence and its perlocutionary effects as extraneous elements of linguistic interaction. I will thus spell out the type of interdisciplinary and critical work we do in this book and how it may add some insights to the already prolific anthropological and interactional critique of idealized Western models of human communication and linguistic understanding (see e.g., Ochs Keenan 1976, Rosaldo 1982, Haviland 1997, Duranti 2014).

4. Violence and some tenets of pragmatics

As the questions about language and violence raised by authors in this volume indicate, violence poses problems for some constructs in pragmatics. Below I offer a sketch of how specific ideologies of the human agent, the transparency of her intentions to herself and the Other, and the social aggregate of which she is a part – as imbricated with the concepts of language user, intentionality and cooperation – are couched in the broadly-defined field of pragmatics. My main purpose