# Semiotic Approach to Media Language

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## Abstract

Semiotic analyses of media language aim for a social and cultural interpretation of a given communication. “Be clear, not obscure:” this is one of four maxims (Grice) for optimal communication that teaches the necessity of being clear and concise. There are undoubtedly many contexts where it is important for mutual understanding that we be clear and concise; for instance, instructions for electronic equipment and for household appliances. The question is raised, however, whether semiotic brevity, clarity and concision is preferable in all contexts, and indeed, there is some evidence to the contrary. Culture and globalization means that media need to be very cognisant of the stringency with which they handle the advice to be linguistically clear and concise. The need to pay attention to situational awareness is highly visible and intrusive, and arguably crucial for the survival of free speech.

**Keywords:** Free speech, globalisation, linguistic obscurity, situational awareness

It is obvious that media and media language are becoming increasingly global and this globalization has had an impact on, not only language and communication in media, but also local languages and local culture. The same television programs and the same news footage are shown everywhere, albeit sometimes in "localised" versions. Global culture industries now produce and distribute consciousness for us all. At the same time, new forms of migration have brought more cultural diversity to the major cities of Europe. At the moment we live in a period of transition, where we have a world of nation states with their national languages and cultures and a global world with its emerging global language and culture, although this new global culture is not universally accepted. In the western world we have an idea of free speech, but not everything can be said and certainly not in the media.

We begin our analysis of media language with a review of H.P. Grice. For a number of years now, Grice's *Cooperative Principle* has been a fundamental paradigm for media language. At the core of his philosophy is the relation between language's *quantity* and *quality*.

> The maxim of quantity:
> 1. Make your contribution as informative as is required;
> 2. Do not make your contribution more informative than is required
> The maxim of quality:
> 1. Do not say what you believe to be false;
> 2. Do not say that for which you lack adequate evidence.
> (Grice 1975)

The Gricean theory of cooperation is still a focal point in pragmatics and journalism, but more context-sensitive theories have been developed. One of these is M.A.K. Halliday's Systemic Functional Linguistics believes a semiotic approach is the most fruitful tool for linguistic analysis of media texts in transnational contexts:

> A language is a complex semiotic system composed of multiple levels, or strata... The central stratum, the inner core of language, is that of grammar.
> (Halliday 1985/1994)

Grammar is the level of "wording" in a language and is realized in the form of sound or writing, with the two levels of phonology and graphology "below" the grammar. But the wording also realises patterns of another level "higher than" itself: the stratum of semantics. This article will discuss whether these paradigms are still valid in the analysis of current media language, with a focus on the balance between "clear" and "obscure."

**The Interpersonal Context and Metafunction**

The terms "clear" and "obscure" have to be considered from the contexts within which media language is set. Language constitutes itself exactly from the interpretive framework within which it is set and comprehended, and its interpersonal meta-functions focus on mechanisms

in the linguistic interaction between people. Language is a resource for establishing relations, including inter-subjectivity in the exchange of information between sender and receiver, or the lack thereof. Through language interaction, we create and maintain social relations with those people that we want to reach with our message, with media as a multichannel phenomenon. According to M.A.K. Halliday, there are, fundamentally, certain types of interpersonal meaning in every communication situation when one wishes to be "clear", viz.:

I. What is the sender's (and thereby, receiver's) role in the communication?
II. What is exchanged between sender and receiver?

Regarding (I), one can play one of two roles. One can either be the giver or the requester regarding (II) with the aim of either giving or requesting some sort of message, and one can exchange information, or things and services, i.e. four expressive functions (Halliday 1985/1994 and Eggins 1996).

In connection with being "clear," language as a resource has a number of well-defined expressive functions that can be designated "proposal" for "offer" and "invitation" and "proposition" for "statement" and "question". These definitions are semantically motivated and see language from above, based on a philosophy that the exchange of information succeeds best through intention and collaboration. Hence, by analysing a certain amount of language data, we can fairly accurately measure whether the exchange of information has been successful. The language data dominate in meaning over the context, while for "obscure" it is precisely the opposite. Only analyses of context can lead us to an understanding what is really behind the blurred message, and whether it really was appropriate, and the intention, to express oneself that way.

We also find in the "obscure" language, three kinds of meaning that are simultaneously realized with an *experiential*, an *interpersonal* and a *textual* semiotic system. The aspects distinguish themselves, by being precisely a set of choices in a culturally-anchored semiotic context system, which falls apart when there are too many information gaps; such as, for example, between parallel societies. One hides behind the "obscure," because one is afraid of the consequences. A novel can, as a proposition, tell a story; a drama can outline conflicts; a philosophical text can discuss existential questions or impose a proscribed interpretation; a textbook can present new knowledge; a journalistic text can deliver news from the big wide world etc. Some genres encompass, have encompassed, and potentially will encompass, more explosive messages compared to those parts of the world where diversity and tolerance are not lauded. The knowledge of generations has been lost because it has not been passed on. Much has been attempted to limit the exercising of language resources and choices, but this appears to be getting more difficult, in line with the developments in technology. On the other hand, propositions are developed to blur, but that nonetheless, elucidate the experiential message. Few people still claim that the earth is flat, or the centre of the universe, but their numbers are

hardly likely to increase. Others seek the future in past conditions, but history has long revealed that those who seek their future in the past have no future.

Both "clear" and "obscure" language are, as mentioned, semiotic constructions, where the amount of information is created through potentials in the understanding of realized as well as blurred messages in a given context. By excluding a clear form of expression in the proposition, other symbols supplant content – this could be, for example, forms of dress, items of dress, hairstyle choice, use of makeup etc. With "clear" language, the message is transformed to an amount of information, while with "obscure" language it results in an information potential that demands a deeper insight for interpretation. The balance between an experiential (experience exchange), an interpersonal (between individuals), and/or a textual proposition, results in a series of semantic dimensions and language layers in which one can orient oneself, and state what "clear" and "obscure" language draws upon in a given context. This can be illustrated by following strata:

Phonology/graphology
Lexico-grammar
Semantic
Context
(Eggins 1996).

**The Relations of the Strata**

The central stratum in "clear" and "obscure" media language is lexico-grammar, the engine room of media language, in which one of the two of language's content strata is found. Lexico-grammar constitutes both "clear" and "obscure" language's resource to "put into words, i.e. to express or underplay the semantic propositions that are realized through the grammatical structure and lexis (word choice) of any language. When blurring or underplaying lexis occurs, semantic gaps, the language potentials are circumscribed and symbols or implied contexts take over, and this is a much more dangerous, self-limiting form of interaction. Lexico-grammar leads naturally over into the semantic stratum – the second of language's content stratum. The semantic is the "heart" of media language, "the pumping station" – a large "heart" that gives many semantic propositions and meanings resources.

The semantic media stratum connects lexico-grammar and the context, which is why the semantic propositions primarily are impinged upon by the demands that contextual factors place upon putting words to extra-linguistic realities. Hence, one must have insight in order to understand and it is precisely here that inappropriate gaps in our media language can be found that either cannot keep pace, are not allowed to be filled out, or are consciously suppressed.

Context's meta-linguistic make-up is constituted by the global and local surroundings as a whole, i.e. the situation (situational context) in which "clear" and "obscure" media language must be able to function or fail because of a lack of resources to understand the propositions.

Three variables have an influence on the extent of semantic downplaying in the situational context; namely the following, as set out by Eggins (1996), who here adds new aspects to Halliday's work. He does not use the term "situational context," but instead refers to:

Field (= subject choice)
Tenor (= relation between sender and receiver)
Mode (=mode of communication)

For Eggins, these three variables constitute the choice of metaphoric and therefore triggered connotations. Field focuses on a social and cultural proposition around a language interaction and in the choice of topics. In many media contexts, a subject such as religious existential philosophy is defined as blasphemy, and subject to bans and edicts. Here, very many blurred expressions can be found. Field similarly includes those activities that fill out a subject with semantic meaning between interacting parties, or that make them relevant for everyone. Hence, field focuses on everything that is communicated, or the absence thereof.

Tenor puts the relations between sender and receiver into the centre, with interaction propositions for the interacting parties by defining their role functions and relations in a social and cultural perspective. There could be permanent characteristics for all the interacting parties or relations that are created between them in a specific situation. Tenor thus focuses on all the relations that the interacting parties have with one another. For instance, in the Danish educational system, the "open ended" discussions are fundamental for everyone, while a religious philosopher's interpretation of ban/edict, in many cultures, circumscribes the interaction proposition for the receiver.

Mode marks the role of media language in the proposition between sender and receiver, as mode is a variable for language potentials and special status in the given situational context. In other words, it puts under a microscope the way language as an entity is used in a given situational context. The internet encompasses many modes (for example, text, sound, music, picture, video, etc.), which is why the net is considered to be dangerous by many people globally, as it is exactly here that it becomes impossible to issue a global ban/edict. The sending tenor can no longer be totally dominant but has to accept semantic propositions directly or indirectly, for example, through an extension of the interaction on social networks.

The three contextual variables are the central situational factors that represent the social context as semiotic resources in which "clear" and "obscure" media language encompass the propositional intentions and aims. The contextual variables realise the semantic and the lexico-grammar stratum. Field has its linguistic counterpart in the experiential meta-function, tenor, in the interpersonal meta-function, and mode, in the textual meta-function. The first two mentioned meta-functions express experience and intersubjective interpretation hereof, i.e. areas that we need to put words into. Missing words trigger semantic interpretation potentials, the consequence of which is that we never manage to formulate content; for example, through

a text or expression. All levels have thus significance for which entities can be drawn upon when we need to articulate a given content or an attitude in the media.

**Some Recent Examples**

A number of different cultural and social situational contexts can illustrate these relations more fully in relation to semantic propositions. In a Danish media context, for instance, it can be seen how a "clear" proposition can have wide-ranging consequences. In connection with the premature death of a 16-year-old boy (Jørgen) in a road accident, studio anchor, Adam Holm, discusses the relationship between knowledge and faith in his column, "Den guddummelige tragedie" (The Dumbvine Tragedy – *play on the Danish words, dumb and divine*) in the daily newspaper, "Politiken." He writes:

> The explanations of the faithful of God's miraculous intervention and punishment of the presumptuous, are, mildly put, confusing. When fifteen schoolgirls were burned to death in 2002, in a school in Mecca, an Imam referred to Allah's anger over the "licentious" state of the school; and the religious police, who had failed to let the frightened girls leave the school's ground, because they were not dressed as prescribed, received words of acknowledgement. There were no popular protests against this Wahhabi nonsense.
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> When people of faith thank their god for "saving" them in a situation of grave danger, it is considered natural. God takes the lives of the presumptuous and protects the pious. Comforting thoughts, but 16-year-old Jørgen, was not guilty of blasphemy or of living a licentious life. But he died just the same. The hurricane in the southern US, the school fire in Saudi-Arabia, and a fatal road accident in Norway, must have a rational explanation. This kind of thing has a methodology.
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> Religion does not have this, and this is apparently enticing for those who desire mysticism and seek the unjustifiable. One has to be unusually besotted with science fiction to be convinced that the Ten Commandments were delivered on stone tablets to Moses by the great builder of worlds and planets himself. (Politiken 2015)

Adam Holm expresses himself unambiguously "clear" on his atheist proposition, and this has had major consequences. He was suspended by Danmark's Radio (Danish State Radio), even though he had written the essay as a private person and not with his "media journalist" hat on. The Union of Journalists took up the case, and it was not until after lengthy negotiations that he was re-instated. If he had been "obscure" in his media proposition then things would probably have been very different.

Art can express and illustrate semantic propositions that are difficult to define through language alone. In Denmark and Germany, for example, we can consider the furore caused by the young poet, Yahya Hassan (born Aarhus, 19 May 1995) of Palestinian background. Hassan critically examines his upbringing, which was marked by violence, neglect and criminality. He puts words to taboo "fields" against a Muslim cultural background, and puts into words his conceptualizations of social fraud, violence against children, and the lack of integration in Danish society; all intertwined with religious dogma. As "tenor," Hassan triggered emotions "for" and "against." Some people feel validated, while others are sceptical or become angry, as religion, to them, is dogma and is not subject to discussion.

When Yahya Hassan gives readings of his poems, this "mode" triggers bedlam, and he must be protected by an extensive security operation. He receives death threats and is assaulted in Copenhagen's main railway station, and in Palestine. The experiential semantic complexity in religious existential philosophies is filled in by Hassan with words, in such a way that they have great interpersonal impact, but with wildly different effects. The poetic language codes (textual meta-function) open up, precisely for the many controversial interpretations and identification methods, as seen in this interview with Hassan by Berlingske Tidende:

> I am not on an errand to criticize Islam. My criticism is more a criticism of religion. Those things I criticize Islam for: religious indoctrination, intransigence, and [having] a patent on the truth, are fundamental to all religions. […]
>
> Previously, this here was a local and family business that affected only me and my immediate circle. Then it turned into a public event and then the reactions became violent. (Berlingske 2014)

Yahya Hassan's poems, with their transformational metaphorical and semantic consequences, show that it demands courage to stand up to these kinds of fields, tenors and modes. Media language, as a form of interaction, is constantly developing and incorporating new semantic fields, experiences, and interpretations of the world. But the fast growing media realities and the increasing number of immigrants, for example, coming into Europe, has recently resulted in an imbalance in the normal, organic development, and culture areas that were previously homogenous have become multicultural sub-segments. The result is sematic gaps at all linguistic levels; theoretical, methodological, and practical. Our cognition has quite simply been unable to meet the furious tempo of the developments, or else these developments have not been recognised, causing people to retreat into a fictional past where things were comprehensible but completely at odds with the realities of the modern world. Both conditions mean that an analysis of the field, tenor and mode of certain functions, and associated communicative meta-functions, clearly indicate that we must either keep quiet and accept that certain fields are taboo, or we must develop a number of semantic slots that can be applied to the great and the small.

**Clear Enough**

H. P. Grice sets out the cooperative principle, encompassed by four maxims, for all language interaction (Ejstrup 2009). One of these directs us to be brief and clear in word choice and syntax when we express ourselves through language. Others direct us to be truthful, keep strictly to what we know, and to be relevant. Are these appropriate in all situations? We should surely answer in the negative when dealing with mass communications through the media, which have to communicate news, reports and portraits from an extremely diverse and globalised world defined by a multitude of cultural norms and bonds (Grice 1975; Husted 1982).

Language is a unique and essential part of being human; we do not know of individuals or human cultures that do not possess language (Skautrup 1968, 1976). Whether it is sound or sign based, the ability to express oneself is always there. Freedom of expression is a subset, and at all times and in all societies, there have been limitations to the degree of this freedom. Subjects, words, categorizations, and, in particular, ways of expressing oneself, can regularly end up blacklisted. Expressing oneself, where there is no law to forbid it, is no guarantee against sanctions. This can be seen when a Danish right-wing politician is assaulted in the street, and a Danish cartoonist in his own home. Both of them expressed themselves on subjects they are quite entitled to, according to Danish law, but which groups of Danish society refuse to accept.

The extent to which language is both genetically and socially constructed has been debated by science, although often these debates seem to have raised more questions than they have answered. All languages allow us to articulate our ideas, but we choose not to express some of them – as simple as that. The rules on how we may express ourselves within a particular culture are as different as our languages are different. Some languages lack quite simple and common words for phenomena and concepts that societies believe should not be mentioned in a particular period; for example, we have never had a commonly used Danish word for *pedophile,* or, in fact, a more specific word for the love of a man for a child. There could be several reasons for this, but one of them is doubtless that the subject is taboo, and that we would rather not come into too close contact with its mention. Given that language is a social community that people share, it is difficult, if not impossible to introduce generally accepted and simple words that refer to phenomena and acts relating to these taboo subjects. For example, in Denmark today, it is often wise to euphemistically say that someone is *of another ethnic background than Danish,* instead of *dark-skinned, brown,* or *a second-generation immigrant.* To the same extent, many Western cultures since the Second World War have restricted the way in which *Jew, Jewish, gas, annihilation* and other common words may be combined. For example, in post-war Germany, many people were horrified when the trams in one of the larger towns carried an advert with the slogan "*Gas spart Geld"* (gas saves money); a brief, relevant, and clear message.
But it is not what one says, but the way and the context in which it is said that are crucial for whether the formulation can be accepted at that point in time, and by the society in which it is

expressed. The fact that it is brief and concise is no guarantee that the language act is optimal – now as before.

In the autumn of 2012, the same issue appeared again when a picture of "Jew-cakes" from Karen Volf was shown on the internet in an advert for the Coop, with the text, "*Jew-cakes, baked in a gas oven. Merry Xmas. 250 grams 23.95.*" A brief and concise caption read, "*here there are no superficial ingredients*" and a text gave precise details about the product. H. P. Grice's maxims appear to have been met in this instance. Subsequently, however, the caption caused huge indignation on social networks because of the inappropriate wording and a poorly concealed reference to the Holocaust. Bisca, the Danish producer of the biscuits, was not slow to announce that the company was sorry about the picture and text, and the director of innovation stated to the Danish electronic media ekstrabladet.dk:

> This is an unpleasant and grim case that can have major consequences for us. "Jew-cakes" is a Danish product that is particularly popular at Christmas, and as a result our sales could be hard hit if our product is connected with so inappropriate a message.

Furthermore, a representative for the supermarket chain, Coop, stated on ekstrabladet.dk that he had investigated the case and he considered the picture and the text to be forgeries, but that he had nonetheless informed the stores that such a sign would, of course, be inappropriate and therefore unacceptable.

**Language and Thought**

The functionalist approach to language holds that we perform language acts and describes how we perform these acts when we communicate with each other. It has, basically, the following four aims:

- Indicative (to describe how we think the world actually is)
- Imperative (to get the world to be as we want it to be)
- Interrogative investigation (to inquire how others think the world is)
- Optative construction (to set out thoughts on desired worlds) (Ejstrup 2009, 2012)

We can communicate about anything with all our different languages; real and unreal, in and outside the situation, and, in the majority of cases, there seems to be a degree of proximity between thought and language. This proximity we often experience and accept without, in any way, knowing or thinking any more about it. At other times there can be a breakdown in language communication precisely because the subject or the commentary is not clearly expressed, and the connection between language (act), and thought, becomes unclear and disappears. It is here that one of language's areas of conflict clearly appears, because of how close to reality and how briefly and clearly is it acceptable to express oneself.

In actual fact there ought not to be any obstacles to saying things as directly as the language technically allows, but there are. Moreover, the greater the understanding of, and diligence shown, regarding staying on the accepted side of an often informal and unwritten norm of what a society accepts, the greater the chance for successfully getting away with almost any kind of expression. One example could be that the debate and the possibilities of expression found a more positive and less heated plateau when, in 2012, Danes went from discussing a special marriage service for homosexuals and lesbians to discussing a *gender neutral marriage service.* The words *homosexual* and *lesbian* were removed from the church's *marriage ceremony,* which gave another balance in the choice of language related to the issue. As a result, the debate gained another "framing" and the language became a little less precise and the tone and momentum in the debate changed and became more positive, even though the basis for the debate was, and is, the same.

We arrive at the exciting and controversial area *use of* language; an area in which limitations pile up, because it is decidedly neither acceptable nor safe to use language and to create images simply as one likes. It is possible, with language, to undertake acts that are actually unlawful, such as when someone makes defamatory statements about others in society. Here, use of language is potentially something we cannot accept and which can be rather dangerous. By way of an example, in 1989 in a Danish provincial newspaper (*Ringkjøbing Amts Dagblad*), Emmy Fomsgaard could state, concisely and clearly and without any apparent problems, "*gay sex is the worst form of whoredom*." Today, such a statement would hardly be acceptable, and may even prompt an investigation from the justice system, because it contains an insult on a minority. This form of content can, of course, be given expression in 2016, but it must be expressed differently. The use of language must be different to be able relate without constraint to the same subject(s). Complete biblical quotes and references to the Old Testament are often used to express these kind of sentiments. Relevant references and language precision most be approached differently; in essence, direct references to words and thoughts, in 2016, must be made more obscure, i.e. they must be led by words and text that are acceptable to another time and culture.

Danes feel that they have freedom of expression, but words are less free; greater consideration and artifice are demanded in 2016. Danish pronunciation, grammar, and vocabulary, like all other languages, has changed over the course of the past twenty-five years; but the limit to what is acceptable language on homosexuality has changed even more, and even more quickly, as part of our general cultural development. The mood and level of abstraction are crucial to the kind of statements we will accept as a society.

**Categorisation**

Different languages place different weight on meaning. Some ideas which certain languages oblige their speakers to express because the phenomena are compulsory elements of grammar are, in other languages, optional. In other words, some languages force speakers to consider

elements of meaning that are optional in other languages. For example, English has completely lost the polite forms of "you," while Danish has retained them as *De, Dem,* and *Deres*. By way of another example, Evidentialis (von hörensagen) is a grammatical form in Turkish for verbs in the past tense. In Turkish, *onu ölürdü – he (or she) has killed him (or her)* – means, I have witnessed it myself. While *onu ölürmüs* betyder – *he (or she) has killed him (or her)* – I have been told so, and I have not actually witnessed it myself. The example shows that, in Turkish, one is forced to state whether you have experienced an event or have just been told about it, while it is not necessary to state whether the agent is male or female. In Danish, the reverse is the case in both regards. These grammatical bound forms illustrate how crucial it is to express oneself concisely on controversial subjects (Skautrup 1968).

A third example is conceptions (unreal worlds) in Danish and French. Danish, like English, does not distinguish the unreal from the real in expressions such as, *we could make drawings of him* (something real in the past or something imagined). In French, one must distinguish between *on pouvait faire des dessins de lui* (real possibility in a real world in the past tense) and *on pourrait faire des dessins de lui* (the imagined possibility in an unreal world). All these examples show that the obligatory grammatical forms in individual languages set limitations on how deliberately unclear language users can be when they express themselves. Undoubtedly, in these obligatory forms, dangers and traps lie in wait in relation to how imprecisely one can possibly express oneself. By implication, great care and ingenuity is needed to be able to say anything about controversial subjects. These differences and dangers are specific to languages and cultures.

It is particularly dangerous when translating from one language to another. In a globalized world, it is the rule rather than the exception that we obtain knowledge of crises and dangers from other cultures with other languages through translation, and thus categorizations and grammatical imperatives different from our own Danish. As previously mentioned, this can be dangerous when translating from one language to another. The language specific categorizations and grammatical dictates gain major significance when we consider the ways in which language users are able to express themselves ingeniously on controversial subjects, with appropriate ambiguity, exactitude, and insinuation; i.e. the provisions afforded by a language to impart clear meaning without causing (too much) upset. For example, the definite noun form is obligatory in Danish and it is extremely important which of the following forms is used: *(en) kirke,* (a church) *kirken* (the church)*, (en) G/gud* (a god)*, G/guden* (God)*, (en) himmel* (a heaven)*, himlen* (heaven) etc. The inflection of each word and expression is crucial for both denotation and connotation in Danish, while, in Turkish, almost every form of the nominate is optional. For example, Lars Hedegaard stated in an interview, in 2009:

> They [Muslims, ed.] rape their own children. One hears it all the time. Girls in Muslim families are raped by their uncles, their cousins, or their fathers.

Lars Hedegaard is not directly explicit about whether he means *some* or *all,* Muslims. In Danish we use the inflected form of the definite singular (for example, *løv**en** er et farligt dyr* – the lion

is a dangerous animal) or indefinite plural (f.eks. *løve**r** er farlige dyr* – lions are dangerous animals) to say something *generic*, i.e. something general that applies to everyone in a group. If Lars Hedegaard had elected to say explicitly *nogle* (some) instead of just *girls, families, uncles,* and *cousins* in the indefinite plural without the specifier, the case might have taken another course. On 20th April 2012, *Jyllands-Posten* could have added *some* in parenthesis instead of writing just *Muslims* without a specifier, but not, crucially, without changing the meaning. These examples show that in any language one can get away, more or less successfully, with formulations that would hardly be acceptable in another language and that there are words and expressions that could create real dangers and problems in translation. A translation from a Danish court report into Turkish could be fatal depending on whether the translation of *he killed him* becomes, that the witness testified *onu ölürdü* or *onu ölürmüs*.

In all languages, it is common to have prototypical representatives for categories; a kind of middle level including words such as *table, chair, hammer, saw, red and blue.* Above these words, there is a level of words called hypernymns – *furniture, tools and colours.* Special words and more specific terms at a middle level are called hyponyms – *stool, camping stool, jigsaw, roofing hammer, light lilac* and *off-white.* The divisions are culture specific, and here language users have rich opportunities to twist words in relation to the specificity of the individual language, particularly when they move into controversial areas. Language function in the form of categorization and the creation of context can contribute to a chaotic system. Language forms a part of this chaos, while simultaneously helping to lead us around it. Language, in itself, is a constituent part of society and of culture, and although words in a democracy can appear to be free, almost as a consequence of their inherent power, they can equally detract from the freedom of others.

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