

10 The ontogenesis of ideology: an interpretation of mother child talk

In their introduction to Karl Marx, Bottomore and Rubel comment that Marx used the term ideology in 'different senses'. In one of these senses, ideology for Marx is a 'deliberately misleading system of ideas' (1963: 21). The sense in which I wish to use this word will differ from the former, by expunging the modifiers 'deliberately misleading'. This is not to deny that the construction of ideology is non-accidental to the extent that it arises from sustained social practices; nor is it to deny that ideologies can be nurtured deliberately in the sense of receiving a coherent-seeming philosophico-logical rationale in the uncommonsense reflections of a community. Elshtain (1981) shows how the ideology of womanhood has been so nurtured in the Western traditions; Wearing's empirical study (1984) confirms the power of that ideology, which controls women's perceptions of their role(s) in society to this day. However, ideologies live through the common everyday actions – both verbal and non-verbal – of a host of social actors who are far from thinking consciously about it. In fact, if ideology is a misleading system, then conscious deliberation, once it becomes accessible, is likely to lead to exposure and could conceivably become instrumental in introducing change. Looked at from this perspective, the most important attribute for the maintenance of ideology appears to be its socially constructed inevitability. Again, a system of ideas can definitely be misleading even while it is being supported by an over-arching, most clear-sighted-seeming analysis of social phenomena. But the very description of some analysis as 'over-arching' or 'most clear-sighted' implies a point of view. One misleading system of ideas can be replaced by another ideology, which may in its turn be revealed as a misleading system of ideas. There is no intention to make a play on words here, but in one sense, at least, ideology cannot be misleading since it leads us to the essential principles governing the social structure in which

the ideology is embedded and for which it provides support. Thus it becomes diagnostic of the values that (some section of) a community lives by. For these reasons, I prefer to think of ideology as a socially constructed system of ideas which appears as if inevitable.

I shall be concerned here with the ideology of woman's work – that is to say the system of ideas that surrounds the work women do in the privacy of their homes. Of course, the ideology of woman's work can be viewed from many angles; my own focus is limited – I am interested not in how the ideology came to be constructed – i.e. what is its historical genesis in the West – but in how the constructed ideology is transmitted. And my answer to even this limited question is not a complete one, since it is based on an interpretation of mother-child talk, which is neither supplemented by father-child talk nor a first-hand observation of patterns of daily living.

The conversations which form the basis of my answer were collected from 24 mother-child dyads in and around Sydney. All mothers were born and brought up in Australia; the average age of the children at the time of recording was approximately 3 years 8 months. The breakdown of the population is presented in Table 10.1.

| | (A) Low education; manual occupation | | (B) High education; specialised job | |
|--------|---|--------|--|--------|
| | Cell 1 | Cell 2 | Cell 1 | Cell 2 |
| Child | 3 | 3 | 3 | 3 |
| Female | 3 | 3 | 3 | 3 |
| Male | 6 | 6 | 6 | 6 |

Table 10.1: The apprentices to ideology

It does not appear necessary to explain the table further: for the present discussion the sub-classification of the population is not highly relevant. The data consists of natural conversation between the child and the mother and was collected for an ARGS project to examine the role of mother's talk in establishing ways of learning. Working on this project with me are Carmel Cloran and David Butt, though I alone am responsible for the views presented here. The recordings were made by the mothers themselves in their home environment. The mothers were requested to turn on the tape recorder whenever they felt that they were engaged in a chat with the child in question; no other requirements were made. On average each dyad took about six weeks to complete six hours of recording time, which, on average, yielded four hours of recorded tape.

I should like to draw attention to the suitability of such conversation as a means of understanding adult preconceptions. To a large extent, all casual con-

versation is revealing about the shared assumptions of a community, precisely because of its unselfconscious, casual nature which masks its deeper social purposes and gives it the air of an activity that is directed toward nothing but the achievement of talk itself. But casual conversation between a close adult and a very young child is especially revealing in that often the very basic assumptions necessary for the continuity of talk have to be spelt out. With such young children, the comfort of sharing the same language does not go so far as to produce the assurance that the other 'understands' the sayings as the adult speaker does. Garfinkle (1967) provides several examples of the breakdown of conversation in which an experimenting student deliberately displayed inability to understand another's 'perfectly ordinary utterances'. Example 1, is taken from his book to illustrate the point:

Example 1

- (S) Hi, Ray. How is your girlfriend feeling?
 (E) What do you mean, 'How is she feeling'?
 Do you mean physical or mental?
 (S) I mean how is she feeling? What's the matter with you?
 (He looked peeved.)
 (E) Nothing. Just explain a little clearer what do you mean?
 (S) Skip it. How are your Med School applications coming?
 (E) What do you mean, 'How are they'?
 (S) You know what I mean.
 (E) I really don't.
 (S) What's the matter with you? Are you sick?
 (Garfinkel 1967; p 42)

But this posture of 'you know what I mean' cannot always be adopted in regard to very young children's questions. In the following extract Kristy (3;7) is discussing with her mother the death of a moth whose wings had got steamed when it flew too low over a hot drink. The child is deeply concerned and on the verge of tears, because she believes *...it wouldn't have wanted to die*. In the midst of this serious discussion, her attention is distracted by her younger sister's behaviour, who is busying herself with tearing some paper. This leads to the exchange below:

Example 2¹

- C: That's (? broken)...Rebecca teared it.
 M: She want what?
 C: Teared.

M: Oh. It's O.K.

C: Why's it O.K.?

M: Pete just brought it home for me to have a look but he didn't need to keep it.

C: Why didn't he?

M: Oh. Oh I don't know. (LAUGHING) I don't think he needed to keep it...
He'd probably read it already.

C: Why he probably read it already?

M: Um I think if he had wanted to keep it and he needed it he would have told me to put it somewhere safe. But he put it there which is the place where we put stuff we don't really care about. That's why I think that he didn't need it. Either he'd already read it or he didn't want it.¹

It is only at this point, that presumably satisfied, Kristy returns to the question of life and death which had preoccupied her earlier. Probing by children, then, produce the near optimal environment for an explanation of those very phenomena which we consider most ordinary, most inevitable and most self-evident.

And there is an important difference between Garfinkle's experimenting students and young children; unlike the students, the children are not being metatextual: they are actually engaged in constructing the text of their immediate culture. So talk becomes a vehicle of learning the taken-for-granted aspects of lived reality. Of course this is not the only vehicle. The data shows the acuteness of children's observation. When Alison (3;5) helps mother make coffee, she observes her own actions, performed under the mother's close supervision; so much coffee per cup, so much sugar and then hot water and then milk. *Ah* says Alison, *milk after*. *Yeah* says the mother, *You gotta pour milk after*.

With so much listening and talking, so much confirming by observation, the picture of woman's work is constructed for the child through the innumerable small momenta of everyday life. I have chosen to talk about this aspect precisely because across the spectrum of my data, this picture emerges with a certain degree of homogeneity – a homogeneity that the data may very well not possess in some other respects. This explains my earlier comment that the sub-classification of the population is irrelevant, where the study of the ideology of woman's work from this data is concerned. It does not matter which section of the population the mothers belong to, they share similar views about woman's work. While not every dyad presents each of the features I discuss below, each displays some combination and none contradicts any of the features. So while the total picture is a synthesis, I believe it respects the mothers' views as displayed in their talk. Let me first spell out the four most outstanding kinds of things that these women with small children, with or without husbands, take in their stride every day of the week, every week of the year.

- (i) First, every woman is an *instructor*. Quite irrespective of her place in the social hierarchy, every woman taking care of a small child is exposed to innumerable searching questions. These questions cover an enormous range: who looked after me when you were a baby, why is Johnny fatter than me, why are those clouds grey, why do you put parsley in water, don't birds talk like us, how does the lavatory chain work and do chickens have knees? Now there is no implication at all that the answers are always accurate, or that they are always provided. Sometimes questions get lost in the flow of conversation; sometimes they are answered tautologically, but it can be claimed with confidence that in every mother-child dyad there is evidence of effort to explain. I suspect that the differences will lie in kinds of explanation offered and the frequency with which they are offered.
- (ii) Every woman is a *labourer*. As I remarked earlier, the setting for these conversations is everyday life. The conversations construct the picture of these women as busy around the house with cooking and washing, getting the kids to bed, getting them ready for school and ministering to their needs. Outside the house, there is the shopping and the garden.
- (iii) Every woman provides *emotional support* to the child/children in the house; this can take the form of praise, concern over a physical hurt or the dispensation of justice if it is needed.
- (iv) And finally every woman is a *companion* to her child. By companionship I mean that the mothers put time and effort into activities which are primarily for the diversion of the young child, participating in colouring pictures, playing with trains and car sets, joining in the football or the cricket game – whatever is going on.

The nature of my data does not permit me to make any systematic comments on the activities of these women in relation to other members – particularly, the adults of the household. No doubt mothers talk to other members of the family, both adults and other children; no doubt, they have friends and neighbours. And, no doubt, apart from these four aspects listed above, there is more to every woman's work. The reason I restrict myself to just these four aspects lies in the fact that proof of the mother's engaging in these four types of activities can be provided directly from my data and, for the present discussion, I am limiting myself entirely to what is in the data, ignoring other parameters whose relevance I would definitely accept.

Now, if the findings were limited to simply a construction of these four facets of every woman's work, there would be nothing remarkable. It is common knowledge that women do these things and we, perhaps, need no research project to show that this is how it is. Let me now shift my focus, by raising the question, how do these women present themselves and their work to the children, in the course of their talk?

Let us first look at the instructor role. There is not one instance in the entire data where a mother can be found to claim credit for having solved a problem, for having worked out, even cooperatively with the child, an explanation to some phenomenon. On the contrary, there is evidence that, at least some mothers, explicitly emphasise the picture of 'silly mummy'. Here is Helen's mother in Example 3. She is a remarkably capable woman and the evidence of her ability to think on her toes can be found across her conversations with Helen. Here she is finding out what Helen did at preschool that day.

Example 3

C: Play with the playdough.

M: And what else?

C: And you forgot my painting!

M: Did you do a painting? ... You didn't tell me ...

C: Well you should've looked at the [?] on those cupboards.

M: Oh I know but I'm such a forgetful mother you should know by now you have to tell my you have to remind me a about these things because I – my brain doesn't work too well sometimes.

C: Mum.

M: Mm?

C: All you have to do is tell the teachers if you forget.

M: Trouble is I forget to tell the teachers.

This is not an isolated instance; nor is the 'silly mummy' picture limited to one class. Of course, a simple rationale for such behaviour is easy to find: it makes the child feel superior and, after all, should it not be regarded as simply a 'game', a 'pretence' whose aim is to boost the child's ego? I have no clear-cut answer to this question, but I cannot help wondering if such behaviour is totally unrelated to the popular picture of woman as somewhat lacking in intellect. In reviewing the *Fontana Biographical Companion to Modern Thought* (Bullock and Woodings) for *The Sunday Times* (2 October 1983), John Vincent pointed out how thinking as an intellectual enterprise is seen by the authors to be the preserve of the white male:

Thinking, it appears, is what white males do. The most numerous people, the Indians and Chinese, do not figure. The Japs seem to get along splendidly without thinkers. All three lag behind speakers of Portuguese.

As for women, they are dragged in, as it were, by the hair, Iris Murdock and Bessie Smith, Queen of the Blues, for instance. Less than one per cent of modern thought is female. Women are good at writing novels and being entertainers, but then they always were, back to Scheherzade.

Of course, we could shrug off this publication as an example of the authors' unthinking bias, but two points appear relevant. First, there is very close relationship between unthinking biases and the maintenance of ideology and secondly, centuries and decades of unthinking biases, codified in scholarly tomes do represent that which by and large becomes 'fact'. 'Truth', we have the saying 'will out'. But, whose truth? And seen from what point of view? I do not think that it is fanciful to claim that it is codified 'fact' generated by unthinking biases that speaks every day out of the mouths of the mothers. In my view, this 'fact' does not fall on fallow ground. If language plays any role in the development of consciousness – and I believe it does – then, it must shape the consciousness of the apprentices to ideology, the mothers' children.

Equally important is the question, is there anyone else in the house we might say to the child, 'clever mummy'? My data of course provides answer here. But it does have Julian's mother saying to him, *I don't know ... you must be clever... Maybe you got it from your Dad*, where it refers to the child's cleverness. Across the data, irrespective of the family's socioeconomic location, with the exception of single-parent families, mothers do build an image of the fathers as the one who should know, as the one who is resourceful in finding practical solutions, as the one who is the locus of intellectual authority. Isn't it quite obvious that organising 14 meals a week, for every week of the year, for a family of three or more requires no practical organisation? And whoever heard of the need for 'rational thinking' in answering children's questions? Would you believe that knowing the names of all the herbs and spices is an accomplishment of the same order as knowing the name of all the tools in a carpentry set? Adrian's mother knows about the herbs anyway, but she also reels off the name and function of all but two items from a carpentry tool set. So she tell Adrian, *Daddy'll know the names of them*, which is more or less echoed by the child, *Yes, he'll know all the names. Daddy'll know*. I would like to draw attention particularly to the near-certainty of the mother's prediction. It may be that Adrian's father, a banker by trade, is also an accomplished handyman and the near-certainty of her prediction through the use of the auxiliary *will* (in reduced form) is justified. However, the interesting fact remains that in talking thus of their husbands, the mothers do not make use of the modals of lower orders of probability; we find *Daddy'll/will* but, in such environment, we do not find *Dad might/may/could/perhaps be able to*. Let me hasten to add that there is no implication that excellence cannot be shared by both partners; I simply do not have the data to confirm or refute this view. It is, however, remarkable that through thousands of transcribed messages these women's assessment of their own accomplishment is meager in their own wordings, while, in many cases, their handling of the children's questions is relatively a contradiction of this assessment.

If the mother's presentation of her instructor role is muted, that of her role as labourer carries certain ambiguities which, at the least, are interesting to note. There are various strands to this. First, there is the view that the exertion and toil in the house are not work. Example 4 is a dialogue between Alison and her mother.

Example 4

C: Is Pop home?

M: No... They're all out. They're all at work.

C: Bob and Mark are working.

M: Yes, Bob's at work. Mark's at work. Everybody's at work.

C: I not at work.

M: No, you're only little.

C: Youse at works?

M: I don't work. I look after you...

C: Who's playing with Pammie?

M: Nobody. Who'd look after you if Mummy went to work...eh?

Not all mothers are as explicit about the non-work nature of their work at home; the view ranges from this to the mother in group B who comments that the child's grandmother does not babysit her anymore because the mother is no longer working. Small wonder, that in the *Macquarie Dictionary*, there is not one sense of worker that fits woman as a worker in her house. This definition is reproduced as Example 5 below:

Example 5

WORKER (2003)

1. one who or that which works: *he's a good steady worker.*
2. one employed in manual industrial labour.
3. an employee, esp. as contrasted with a capitalist or a manager.
4. one who works in a specified occupation: *office workers, research workers.*
5. (in the U.S.S.R.) a citizen, excluding the peasants and members of the army or navy.
6. Entomol. the sterile or infertile female of bees, wasps, ants, or termites, which does the work of the colony.
7. Also working girl. colloq. a prostitute.

The nearest a woman engaged in woman's work comes to is sense 5, but we are not in the USSR; or to 6, but women with offspring are obviously not sterile or infertile, even though they may be busy as bees! There is then the paradox that when, like David's mother, one employs someone to look after the

children, then that person is worker, but the person whom she replaces is not a worker! It would be a mistake to take Example 5 as an attack on the *Macquarie Dictionary*. It is no part of a dictionary to moralise; its business is to record the usage of the community. For the community, in general, woman's work is just not work, as the definition of 'work' in the same dictionary will show. By these 'fashions of speaking' (Whorf, 1956) whose motivation ultimately traces itself to the principles of the community's economic organisation, a woman working in the privacy of her home is consigned to the grey space between the 'dole-bludger' and the 'honest worker', who brings home a 'decent pay', for his/her physical exertion. She is not even 'self-employed'; she is 'house-wife'. The assumption is not lagging far behind that what a woman works at in her house is her private business, without any more consequence for the life of the community than you or me polishing our shoes, or weeding our own private patch of the garden.

The second strand to which I would draw attention is the presentation of the work as uninteresting. In Example 6 Cameron's mother is decidedly trying to get him off her hands; Cameron is interested in staying back to watch the cartoons, but note how much more is passing between the two interactants:

Example 6

- M: [? You'll probably] have to get changed into your work clothes later, because Daddy's going to the tip.
 C: What for?
 M: Daddy needs a helper.
 C: Oh.
 M: When he goes to the tip.
 C: What?
 M: Daddy needs a helper when he goes to the tip.
 C: Oh I want to play on my bike. I don't want to go to the tip.
 M: You do?
 C: I want to stay here [?] ...
 M: You haven't been to the tip [? With your Daddy] for a long time.
 C: No
 M: It'd be much more interesting going to the tip than helping Mummy do the Vacuuming.
 C: Mm.
 M: Because that's a boring job isn't it?
 C: I have to stay home to watch my cartoon.

Now it is true that Cameron's mother wants him out of her way; but this is definitely not the whole of the story. For lack of space I have not included the

remaining part of this dialogue covering about a page and a half, in which the mother points out to Cameron that he is behaving like Piggie Won't, whose brothers were adventurous, went out into the world and had fun while Piggie Won't, staying at home, missed out on everything worth doing. The same fate, she suggests, awaits Cameron unless he gets out to help Daddy at the tip instead of helping Mum clean the house. Kristy's mother who shows exemplary patience and a sensitive understanding of her own children's needs, tells Kristy:

I think that you probably don't play with little kids because they're not very interesting most of the time

Cameron's mother discusses with him the various professions that he might take up when he's big. The fire brigade, the police force and the construction and building trades are discussed in some detail. Cameron appears to work with a paradigm: if I can't be this, what can I be? As the possibilities of those professions which presently engage his attention are exhausted, he asks at least twice, *mum, what could I be in the home, in the house?* Is it at all significant that Cameron's mother does not even 'hear' this question?

The household labour is a fact that impinges upon people in the house all the time – but it impinges upon them as a necessity, not as something that could ever be enjoyed. And this is the third strand.

Pete's mother says:

I have to take in laundry

Daniel's mother echoes:

I just have to go and get the washing in now, I'm afraid

Sam's mother explains her tired yawn:

I had to get up twice last night because Johnny kept crying

And, of course, many of the mothers say at one time or another,

I have to fix the tea/dinner now

The modals of necessity and obligation come into full play. This is definitely not the only environment in which they appear, but this is one environment in which they are used with a high frequency.

Finally, woman's work is presented as hard work, but in an oblique manner. It is an interesting aspect of this presentation that such comments on the part of the mother occur unexpectedly and fleetingly in the middle of some other activity, the course of which is hardly disturbed by such admissions. In Example 7 Julie's mother has been bathing her, playing with her daughter's toes and

letting the daughter play with her own fingers. Julie is trying to get her mother's fingers soaped and washed, she requests the mother to lay them down flat in the bath.

Example 7

C: 'Cause the water's [? Low] now... you've got strong glue that one.

M: Yes, I have rather, Haven't I? Oh, they're beautiful. Thank you.

C: Up.

M: Oh, Mummy's fingers are so tired tonight.

C: You can put them down.

M: They've been very busy fingers, haven't they?

Child and mother continue playfully as if the tired fingers had never been mentioned. There is no point in multiplying such examples, but of the 24 mothers nearly three quarters mention the fact of tiredness at some time. Significantly, the mother's tiredness never appears to affect the flow of activity. Whether it is 'work' in the 'true' sense or not, it still 'has to be done'.

Moving now to the third aspect of woman's work in the home – that of providing emotional support, I come to a finding that was completely unexpected. Many of the mothers express the need for such support from their children – it is as if, the actual roles were being reversed through these sayings. In Example 8 it is Karen's mother who seeks this support:

Example 8

M: Oh I've got a bad cold.

C: Oh.

M: Are you going to look after me ... eh?

C: Oh.

M: Oh ah, sorry. (COUGHING AGAIN)

C: I can't when I have to go to school.

M: But you don't have to go to school for a few days.

C: I know.

M: You going to look after me?

C: Yeah.

M: O.K.

In Example 9, it is Nathan's mother who seeks such support and the child's bewilderment appears quite obvious:

Example 9

M: I have to lie down and put my leg in the air. Will you look after me?

C: No.

M: You won't! (SURPRISED)

C: Why?

M: You won't look after me?

C: Where are you – where are you gonna do it?

M: in the lounge room [I think]

C: No, do it here

On the question of companionship, the data presents nothing significant, apart from the fact that mothers are lavish in the expression of appreciation whenever the child helps in the house – this happens more often with girls than with boys. So what conclusions can we draw about the ways that mothers present themselves and their work to their children?

I feel that there is a tension here. The child's active experience of happenings in the house must, in some sense, create the idea that mothers are busy; that their 'non-work' is in some sense 'work'. But the evaluation of that which claims that mother's physical efforts and attention is a different matter. With but a few possible exceptions, most human action is neither inherently good nor bad; it neither inherently merits prestige nor stigma, as Durkheim (1964) suggested; nor is that evaluation rationally commensurate with the benefit that might accrue from human action to (some sections of) the community. There is, thus, an essential arbitrariness about values attached to human actions. I shall comment briefly on this point below. Here let me say simply that while language is not the only means for (re)producing the values attached to human action, it is, nonetheless, one of the most powerful instruments for the purpose. If this premise is accepted, then, from the example of mothers' sayings presented here, it would appear inevitable that the very young child, whose primary domain of experience is the home, would imbibe a view of woman's work in which it has the status of a toil imposed by necessity, a physical exertion which is not work, a tiresome enterprise which is inherently uninteresting and definitely lacking in demands on the higher functions of human intellect. As the young children walk out of their homes, where the foundations of their social being are laid, they are more than passively prepared to acquiesce in a confirmation of this early, perhaps not yet well articulated view, which will be strengthened to a clear certainty, by experiences outside the house. The evidence from my data suggests, then, that the ontogenesis of ideology occurs early, if the ideology is to take hold. And the mechanisms for this ontogenesis are the habitual forms of communication, wherein the taken-for-granted nature of the social world is transmitted. A dominant ideology has to receive support at every level of human

experience to survive, otherwise the fabric of inevitability is torn and glimpses of an alter-ideology are afforded which have the potential of undermining the credibility of the dominant ideology. Whatever one's reservations against or enthusiasms for the 'feminist' discourse, it certainly has performed the function of rupturing the credibility of one of the most dominant, most universally shared ideologies.

Seen from this point of view, the distinction between deep and surface phenomena, so fashionable in today's academic discussions appears entirely unconvincing. There is no essential discontinuity between what human beings do, which includes what they say (Halliday, 1973; 1978) and the social structure in which they have a locus. The social structure comes into being and is continuously enacted through what human beings are doing, have done and will do. It would, however, be naïve to suppose that the ideology of woman's work can be changed simply by changing the habitual forms of maternal communication. Such an implication is nowhere intended in this paper. Habitual forms of communication spring from a perception of what appears socially relevant. There is thus a logical contradiction in entertaining the belief that the habitual forms of communication can be consistently and successfully changed without other accompanying changes; it is my understanding that this is one of the arguments Bernstein (1971) developed some time ago. Clearly this argument holds not because forms of communication, as many other human acts, display only "the regularities and complexity perceived on the surface of the social world" (Sharp, 1981); rather, it is because ideologies, like other social facts, are orchestrated simultaneously at multiple levels of human existence. For example, the ideology of woman's work reaches out beyond the house into the market place where labour is sold for wages and thus turned into 'work'. And no doubt that behaviour, in its turn, reaches out to other areas of socioeconomic organisation. The values attached to the actions of women in the privacy of their homes appear arbitrary – i.e. unmotivated – only so long as the wider context is ignored: within the four walls of the house, it appears extraordinary to think of woman's work as non-work, but as it makes contact with a wage-based economy, which operates in most societies today, its non-work nature is legitimised. One important reason why woman's work is not work lies in the fact that, of itself, it does not create the kind of economic independence granted to most wage-earners. At this stage of the analysis, the standard dictionaries are not 'misleading', they are simply recording what we actually do. It seems to me that none of these levels of analysis is just a 'surface' behind which hides the 'ultimate truth'. The examination of ideology – and of social phenomena in general – requires a spiral model, rather than a box model in which the lid – the surface – is lifted to reveal the content, or the ultimate truth. Subscribing to the age-old division of the ultimate cause

existing independent of the effect, we tend to be looking for the "underlying determinants of surface manifestation" (Sharp: 1981). I would suggest that Barthes' generalisation regarding the relation between 'content' and 'form' in literature can be usefully extended to the study of the social as well, so that a social phenomenon would be like "an onion, a construction of layers (or levels, or systems) whose body contains finally no heart, no kernel, no secret, no irreducible principle, nothing except the infinity of its own envelopes – which envelop nothing other than the unity of its own surfaces." (Barthes, 1971)

Rejecting, then, this dichotomy between the surface and deep, we can turn to language as a form of human action (Malinowski, 1923; 1935), which contributes, along with other semiotic systems, to the construction of the social world. A special focus on language is clearly required in the study of the onset of forms of social consciousness. This is because the location of very young children in society is ambiguous. They are not active participants in many of its processes and, at least in the early years of their life, they may be said to enter society, as it were, secondarily through their contacts with adults. In this contact many of the social systems do not impinge upon them directly, but are refracted through the adult's systems of communication, amongst which language undoubtedly has an important place, if only due to the child's early developed ability to enter into linguistic processes. In talking about the role of maternal linguistic communication in the ontogenesis of a particular ideology, I have borrowed the expression "fashions of speaking" from Whorf (1956), while the phrase 'habitual forms of communication' is derived from my reading of both Whorf and Bernstein. I believe the full import of these expressions needs to be understood to grasp their relevance to the role of language in the creation and maintenance of ideology.

Even to imply that ideology, through however many layers of the 'onion' of culture can finally be seen as language is at once claiming too much and saying too little. It is claiming too much, because of the simple fact of omission, it ignores the many nonverbal semiotic systems, whose existence side by side with language is not immaterial to the examination of ideology. The claim of a bi-unique connection between ideology and language – even though many-layer-mediated – could be valid only on the assumption that there exists a complete translatability between language and other semiotic systems. I would suggest that this assumption is questionable. To quote Foucault (1970):

It is not that words are imperfect, or that, when confronted by the visible, they prove insuperably inadequate. Neither can be reduced to the other's terms: it is in vain that we say what we see; what we see never resides in what we say. And it is in vain that we attempt to show, by the use of metaphors, or similes, what we are saying; the space where they achieve

their splendour is not deployed by our eyes but that defined by the sequential elements of the syntax.

Vološinov (1973) voices the same position:

None of the fundamental, specific ideological signs is replacable wholly by words. It is ultimately impossible to convey a musical composition or pictorial image adequately in words. Words cannot wholly substitute for a religious ritual; nor is there any really adequate verbal substitute for even the simplest gesture in human behaviour. To deny this would lead to the most banal rationalism and simplisticism.

Complete translatability is a myth not only across two languages, but also across the verbal and non-verbal semiotics within the same culture. To the extent that this claim is true, it would be misleading to create the impression that the examination of ideology boils down to an examination of language. Language may presuppose ideology, but, both for its genesis and its sustenance, ideology needs more than language. The semiotic potential of a culture is not equal to the semantic potential of the languages of a culture (Halliday, 1973). It appears, then, that a linguist who would aspire to throw light on the construction and maintenance of ideology, must be prepared, first, to place the verbal semiotic side by side with other semiotic systems and, secondly, to examine the ways in which the various sign systems operative within a culture, do not 'remain in isolation' from each other: but mutual support is not tantamount to mutual identity.

On the other hand, the claim that language can be shown to be entirely a purveyor of ideology does not say enough; it provides no explicit indication of how the same language can be used in the construction and maintenance of qualitatively distinct ideologies. Granted that the notion of 'same language' is theoretically problematic, still, I believe, we would wish to say that both Halliday and Chomsky use the same language for the exposition of their ideologies about language, which are miles apart from each other. It is true that if two texts by these authors are placed side by side, the lexicogrammatical analysis of the two will show them to be different; but it is equally true that any two texts by any one of these authors will show lexicogrammatical differences. So naturally there arises the question: which differences are significant for their ideologies and which are not? I believe that this question cannot be answered without some such concept(s) as 'orientation to coding' (Bernstein, 1971) or 'configurative rapport' and 'fashions or speaking' (Whorf, 1956) or 'consistency of foregrounding' (Hasan, 1984b) or 'semantic style' (Hasan, 1984c) or 'semantic drift' (Butt, 1983), without implying that each of these concepts is entirely identical. A brief discussion of at least the Whorfian notions appears necessary.

The belief is widely accepted that ‘language is independent of any specific purpose’ (Hjelmslev, 1961) More explicitly, by virtue of its internal design, every language has the potential of meeting any of the needs of its speakers. This is not because language is an impartial mirror of an immanent reality; rather it is because the speakers’ reality is a reality largely created by language (Hasan, 1984a). This position implicit in Saussure’s work (1966) is made explicit in Hjelmslev (1961) and better elaborated in Whorf’s studies, who maintained that:

the world is presented in a kaleidoscopic flux of impressions which has to be organised by our minds – and this means largely by the linguistic systems in our mind. We cut nature up – organise it into concepts and ascribe significances as we do, largely because we are parties to an agreement to organise it this way – an agreement that holds throughout our speech community and is codified in the patterns of our language. The agreement is, of course, an implicit and unstated one, *but its terms are absolutely obligatory*; we cannot talk at all except by subscribing to the organisation and classification of data which the agreement decrees.

I would draw attention to the latter half of this extract, according to which (i) the codified patterns of a language are universal to all its speakers and (ii) the flouting of these patterns is tantamount to the impossibility of talk. Had Whorf stopped at this point, he could have been accused more justifiably of a simplistic hypothesis about ‘mind in the grip of language’ (Bolinger, 1975). But Whorf also made an important and systematic distinction between commonsense and uncommonsense knowledge, showing how the vicissitudes of the evolution of the latter are related to commonsense knowledge constructed by everyday fashions of speaking wherein the lexicogrammatical patterns of a language assume a background status, making certain concepts of reality appear inevitably real. There is thus a qualitative difference between habitual forms of communication and communications in which one is attempting to be, as it were, metasemantic, though the latter is still not completely freed from the exigencies of the former (Halliday, 1984b). The possibility of the evolution of uncommonsense knowledge to the point where in some specific respect it runs counter to everyday reality constructed by language – e.g. the Einsteinian hypothesis – is important to Whorf’s argument: it points to the tenuousness of the relationship between ‘codified patterns of language’ and our pro-tem ‘dissections of nature’. Such tenuousness would not exist if language were a mirror of reality. At the same time the relationship between the form of language and concepts of reality accounts for the persistence of commonsense knowledge, according to which the speakers of English, for example still subscribe to a concept of time as independent of space and as an

aggregate of discrete, individual moments. For example, this concept of time is validated each time we say 'each time'. Whorf argues that the concepts of reality constructed by everyday habitual forms of communication are accepted at some level of consciousness by all speakers of a language; that this tacit acceptance is essential to the possibility of talk.

If we argue that the reality constructed by the background phenomena of a language – its automatised formal patterns – is a reality specific to that language and not necessarily an account of 'how things really are', then all speakers of a language may be said to subscribe to the same ideology at some level of consciousness, in the specific sense of seeing something as inevitably so. I would suggest that this kind of general 'agreement' represents an infrastructure whose presence is a *sine qua non* for the construction of more specific ideologies, e.g. that of woman's work. But Whorf showed quite clearly that even at the most general level of analysis the characterisation of the ideology cannot be achieved by the examination of isolated lexicogrammatical patterns. He suggested that for such an examination we need the concept of configurative rapport. I believe by this expression Whorf meant the bringing together of those patterns of language which, in toto, construct a consistent semantic frame, leading to the 'deep persuasion of a principle behind phenomena'. One outstanding example of configurative rapport provided by Whorf is that which articulates the principle of objectification. Articulating this principle in SAE languages are phenomena – i.e. patterns of language – which from the point of view of lexicogrammar could only be considered heterogeneous. According to Whorf they include the number system, the tense system, the binomial pattern and the weakening of grammatical distinctions between abstract and concrete nouns. No single category here is by itself sufficient for the articulation of objectification, which can be glossed as the treatment of abstracts as if they were concrete objects with spatial extension and clear boundaries. Together they all point in the same direction. Using similar techniques, I have attempted to show (Hasan, 1984c) that in Urdu there exists a configurative rapport between patterns of reference, ellipsis and a bundle of patterns normally known as 'honorifics'. One principle this configurative rapport articulates is that of the sanctity of boundaries between hierarchies of social roles.

In my view it is this kind of analysis which is capable of indicating which linguistic patterns are relevant to the construction of which ideology and, by so doing, such an analysis can provide a basis for understanding the meaning of lexicogrammatical differences between two or more texts – i.e. whether the differences are ideologically significant or not. I do not think that we can argue that modality or suppressed negation (Kress and Hodge, 1979) or subordination (Martin and Peters, 1984) are inherently significant ideologically. Nor can we argue that all differences between texts are necessarily constitutive of different

ideologies. Each one of the extracts from my data presented above differs from the others in some lexicogramatical respect(s). But if by presenting this data I have been able to construct a picture of (at least some aspects of) the ideology of woman's work, then this is because there are linguistic patterns present whose constellation articulates a consistent semantic frame. Some of these patterns are:

- (i) a contrast in attributes ascribed to male and female parent, whereby the latter carries the less desirable attribute(s);
- (ii) the presence of modals of obligation in the environment of material actions e.g. *cook, wash-up, make, clean*, if the role of actor is realised by an item referring to mother;
- (iii) the textually ambiguous status of the ascription of physical exhaustion to mother, which ambiguity arises from the lack of cohesive support for such items as *tired, exhausted* etc.;
- (iv) the juxtaposition of work and behavioural processes e.g. *look after, take care of*, so that their equation is negated, whether explicitly or implicitly. Although a more meticulous analysis might reveal other relevant patterns, perhaps the above list is sufficient to support the claim that to the articulation of an ideology what is criterial is the constellation of a set of linguistic patterns – a configuration of patterns in rapport with each other.

But wherein does the origin of such constellation lie? If we consider language as a paradigmatic, then the system permits, certainly not all, but many combinations – which is one of the reasons why language can be independent of any specific purpose. For example, the selection of almost any modal feature is possible with material action – not only *have to wash up*, but also *can/might wash up*; contrasting with the attribute *silly* for *mummy*, is also the possibility of the attributes *clever/bright* and so on. The selection of a specific constellation of patterns cannot, then, be seen as dictated by the system of language. If a specific set of options is selected it is there because it is capable of constructing the meanings the occasion is perceived to require. This implies that the patterns in a constellation – the patterns possessing a configurative rapport – display a semantic consistency. If in the context of control, it would be odd to find an utterance such as, *I'd rather you didn't make so much noise, otherwise I'll hit you*, this is because the meanings of the two messages are not consistent with each other; threats are not consistent with the granting of personal discretion. Using Bernstein's terminology we may say the production of texts – language operating in the context of situation – requires 'coding orientation'. It is probably true that our ideas about the study of meanings have not reached the stage where the kind of semantic consistencies I have drawn attention to can be

described in an explicit way. But if linguists are interested in the examination of ideologies and other important matters concerning the relationship between language and society, then such advances in the study of language as a meaning potential will have to be made. And it is my belief that when progress in this area begins, we shall need to bridge the gulf between Saussure's *langue* and *parole*, probably very much along the lines suggested by Hjelmslev (1961), Firth (1957b) and Halliday (1977b). If a specific configurative rapport – a constellation of linguistic patterns – is perceived as criterial in the context of some ideology, it is not because the system of language has forced these patterns together; its contribution lies in providing the resources. The configurative rapport comes into existence and acquires a life because of our fashions of speaking as our fashions of speaking are the bearers of our ideology. It is through these fashions of speaking that the prehension between the patterns of a configurative rapport becomes established and we come to recognise that the deployment of such and such lexicogrammatical patterns constructs such and such a grouping of meanings, which finds support through such and such of our doings and thus perpetuates an ideology which we ourselves have created through our sayings and doings. Helen's mother is far from having attempted an analysis of these phenomena, but she appears to subscribe to some such view in the following extract. Helen is helping mother wash up a saucepan lid which appears to need a lot of scrubbing:

C: You have to do it hard, don't you?

M: Mm you do, don't you, yes ...

C: Doesn't matter for you or me to do these.

M: No.

C: Because we can do it the right way, God teaches us.

M: No God doesn't teach you things like that, it's mummy's job to teach you things like that.

Notes

1 Transcription conventions:

M = mother

C = child

[?] = unintelligible

[? + item(s)] = item(s) not clearly intelligible, best guess in view of contextual, co-textual and phonological clues

() = encloses contextual comment, not evident from wording alone

large square bracket left open covers overlapping speech by the dyad.