



TOK connections: Language, euphemism and ambiguity

What is the relation between the style of language used and the history written?

Language is a crucial vehicle for the acquisition and dissemination of knowledge. It is also an instrument in facilitating misinformation.

Like many human societies which live with hierarchical structures, whether it be Nazi Germany, Communist China, Stalinist Soviet Union or the government of Hutu Rwanda, euphemism has been used to convey as well as disguise meaning and true intent. Ambiguity in language can be deliberately cultivated in organized societies to have listeners select the meaning they desire, and not always the one intended by the speaker. In Nazi Germany the euphemism “the Final Solution” was used to refer to the plan

to annihilate Jews. The Japanese in China used “Unit 731” as a cover during the second world war for their experiments on Chinese and Russian prisoners, referring to them as “logs” or “Maruta”, used in such contexts as “How many logs fell?”

In Rwanda, even prior to the killing in April 1994, genocide was referred to as “akazi gakomeye” in Kinyarwanda, which translates as “big job” or as “umuganda”, which means “special work”. The term “Inyenzi” has already been discussed. In addition, RTLM radio used the term “simusiga” or “hurricane” for what was happening – hiding the reality of a man-made genocide. Deceptions in language were echoed in deceptions in actions.

Other terms include the following.

| Euphemism | Real meaning |
|--|--------------------------------------|
| “Tree felling” | killing |
| “Bush clearing” | the slaughter of men |
| “Pulling out the roots of the bad weeds” | the murder of women and children |
| “Going to work” | killing the enemy |
| “Using tools” | machetes, firearms, clubs and spears |
| “Finishing the work of the revolution” | killing the Tutsi from 1959 onwards |
| “Interethnic fighting” | genocide |
| “Accomplices, infiltrators, the minority” | all terms used to refer to the Tutsi |
| “The great mass, the majority people, and “the innocent” | all terms used to refer to the Hutu |

Questions

Consider these points about euphemisms and ambiguity:

- 1 Examples are often found in campaign promises from politicians.
- 2 They can also be used for more artistic and pleasant purposes, in songs and poems.
- 3 Some go so far as to say that vagueness and ambiguity allow creativity.
- 4 Think of examples of language used in advertising, political speeches or songs to deliberately distort the meaning in a message. Share these with a partner or the group.

The role of the media

The role of the Rwandan media in serving the Habyarimana government and sowing the seeds of genocide has already been partially addressed. The two principal devices used to great effect were the magazine *Kangura* and the **RTLM radio station**. *Kangura* continued to spit forth hatred and propaganda when the genocide began in April, but it was probably the radio which became the most effective. RTLM broadcast in a popular, talk show format; appealing to the young, the unemployed, delinquents and particularly the thugs in the Hutu militia

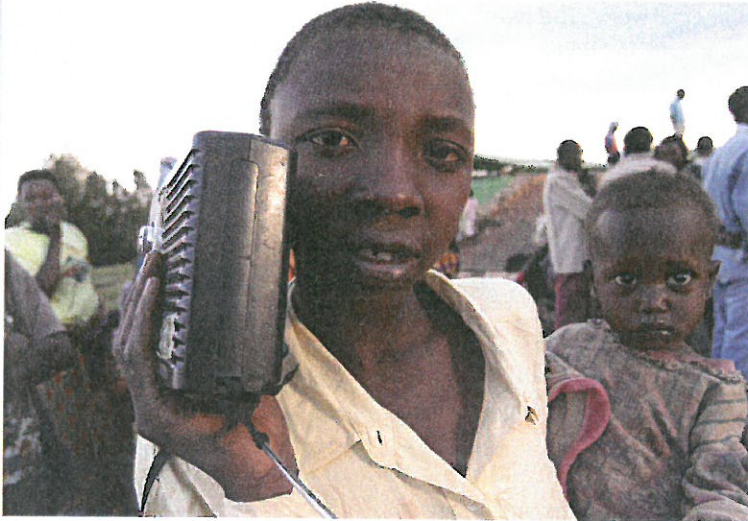
Class discussion

How can one gauge the extent to which history is told from a particular cultural, national or individual perspective?

groups, the radio station used street language, disc jockeys, pop music and phone-ins. It was immediate, accessible and informative in support of the killers.

Since its introduction early in the 20th century, the radio has proved to be a remarkably powerful tool. It has been used both positively, as a vehicle of liberation and propaganda in the Cold War, and negatively, for example, in Nazi Germany between the two world wars. After the Cold War, nowhere in the world was the radio used as insidiously as in Rwanda, both before and during the genocide.

▼ RTLM – the “hate radio” of the Rwandan genocide



The UN and NGOs had warned of the central role the radio played in inciting ethnic tensions and encouraging murder. When the genocide began, others identified the media, and specifically the radio broadcasts, as an essential component which should be shut down. The UNAMIR commander Romeo Dallaire urged for RTLM to be taken off the air but the UN itself did not have the means to stop the radio station broadcasting – either through jamming, direct air strikes or covert means. The RPF, recognizing the effectiveness of the media in Hutu power, shelled the radio station in the first week of the genocide. However, within hours the station was transferred to a mobile unit from which it broadcast throughout the 100 days, through to the day before the RPF took Kigali on 4 July. Afterwards, it was broadcast from Gisenyi province and then from Zaire, where the Hutu government in exile used it to continue propagating its poisonous message.

It was the consistency of the message that worked so well. Through its informal, spontaneous and lifelike style, its use of eyewitnesses, and walkabout approach, the voices of ordinary people were delivered to the man in the street by political leaders and respected ministers. The impact of the radio made the war immediate for its listeners. Even some of the wounded RPF soldiers listened from their hospital beds. The radio played an active role in the mass killing by reading out lists of “enemies” who should be tracked down and killed. According to the broadcasts, anyone at the road blocks who did not have an identity card, “*should be arrested and may lose his head*” (quoted in Metzler, 1997).

Action and inaction

Why didn’t the international community attempt to control the media and, in particular, stop the radio broadcasts which they knew were being used to encourage genocide? There are three reasons why the US government did not:

- first, it would have been expensive;
- second, in the aftermath of Somalia, intervention in any African country would have been politically unpopular; and
- third, the issues relating to international law prevented it.



It is highly likely that the second reason was the most significant in determining US actions, although the government explained and justified its inaction by quoting the third reason, regarding international law. In May, the US Department of Defense recognized the role of the radio in the genocide but said that jamming it would be “ineffective and expensive” – it would cost about \$8,500 per hour. Others in the administration countered with arguments regarding freedom of speech and the legality of such action. The bottom line was a lack of political will to become involved in Rwanda.

A BBC correspondent, Mark Doyle, said:

But why did the outside world allow this to happen in Rwanda, when it knew damn well what was going on? You have to conclude that it's because they're African. I don't see any other conclusion that is possible ...

The international media initially had an impact in Rwanda by its absence. It had been a media image that had contributed to the withdrawal of the USA from Somalia. Dead US servicemen being dragged through the streets of Mogadishu precipitated the US departure; would the same image have made a difference in Rwanda? Ten dead Belgian soldiers made the difference to that country's commitment. The lack of media almost certainly enabled those in the international community to *not* take action; the UNAMIR commander Romeo Dallaire is convinced of this. He commented later that the real crisis of the time was not in a small black African country; the media was more interested in Yugoslavia, the OJ Simpson case and Nelson Mandela's election in South Africa. All of these were, from the evidence, more important to the international media than the situation in Rwanda. The media, Dallaire believes, like so many others in the international community, failed Rwanda.

The importance of the media in the genocide is clearly demonstrated by the fact that afterwards, the UN tribunal for Rwanda established that men armed only with words could commit genocide. The judge stated that, “*Without a firearm, machete or any physical weapon, you caused the death of thousands of innocent civilians.*” It was the first time since the Nuremberg Trials that hate speech and words had been prosecuted as a war crime. Ngeze, the owner and editor of *Kangura*, and Nahimana, the founder of RTLM, were charged with responsibility for the systematic killing of the Tutsi people in Rwanda and each sentenced to 30 years in prison.