

Coarse television language as an ethical indicator of how cultured a society is

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■ *Television is one of the discoveries of the 20th century that has had the greatest repercussions on social interactions everywhere, as it has changed habits, has facilitated transactions, has provided education, has created and destroyed celebrities, has universalised and globalised. In fact, we could say that it has become a common symbolic environment of interaction with the majority of the things we think and do. This article attempts to show the relationship established between language, television and culture of today and become an indicator of the ethical values of a society, the relationship between what is seen on television, what is said, the values conveyed and the possible influence on the behaviour and values of people.*

Keywords

Television, coarse language, values, ethics, models, behaviour, education, pedagogy.

Introduction

Nowadays, no-one doubts that television is one of the discoveries of the 20th century that has had most repercussions on social interactions everywhere. It has changed customs and habits, has facilitated transactions, has provided education, has created and destroyed celebrities, has universalised and globalised. Nonetheless, and without wishing to be apocalyptic, we are aware of the great power it has and we make it socially responsible for creating many of today's ills: generating violence, causing a loss of identity and the intellectual atrophy of future generations, among others. But we have to look back at the origins of television to see that its main purpose, at the beginning, was not to generate messages but to transmit them. Television was therefore used to transmit any kind of content, irrespective of the language it used.

We believe it is important to remember that, in spite of television having a limited use at the beginning, as there were few people who could see it, over time this use has spread and the number of homes with television has increased exponentially. This led to the start of the great transformation and it gradually took on more functions in addition to the initial one (transmitting information). We are referring to educational, recreational, critical and cultural functions, among others. This overloading of responsibilities has led to television being attributed many of today's social dysfunctions. In our opinion, the causes are highly varied, as in a society such as our own, so changeable and complex, it is difficult to attribute the origin of anything to only one element, so we believe it is very brazen to lay the "blame" or the "responsibility" exclusively at the door of television. If we were to analyse these social dysfunctions in depth, something which is not our lot and for which there are specialists today, in almost all cases we would have to refer to a multi-factor origin.

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On the other hand, the qualitative increase in cultural ignorance, the reduction in the number of books read by people every year, the growth in the levels of violence, manifestations of misunderstood patriotism, even the "bad speech" of people or the incorrect use of language have become effects that need to be analysed.

Although we doubt the training purpose of television (because, as we have mentioned above, it was not designed for this task), we do believe that the language it employs should be taken into account, as both the form and content are perceived as models by some viewers. In other words, the ways of speaking used on television are imitated by many viewers in their everyday lives and are therefore models of the values transmitted.

In our society, all sectors interrelate with each other and the actions of one have repercussions on the others. If we compare society with a living organism, the wellbeing of whose organs largely influences its functioning, we can extrapolate that, when anything goes wrong and affects it negatively, the whole suffers just like the parts. Therefore, and continuing with this simile, we may deduce that the use of coarse language in the street may be a consequence (or not) of coarse language on television which, lately, has been proliferating at great speed.

Along the same lines, we must also be aware that each country's television system is a reflection of its historical, political, economic and cultural context (Gerbner, 1958, quoted by Bryant and Zillman, 1996). Hawkins and Pingree (1982) talk of the "acculturation of value systems" when referring to the fact that, since childhood, we learn from television, thanks to repeated "lessons", values, ideologies and perspectives. In this way, television has become a common symbolic environment of interaction for the majority of things we think and do. An exploration of its dynamics can help us to develop and understand the forces of social cohesion, of cultural dependence and resistance to change, as well as the need to develop alternatives and the essential degrees of independence for behaviour and self-control in the television era (Bryant and Zillman, 1996, pg. 60).

We are eminently social beings and it's true that we do not relate merely through oral and/or written language but the language of gesture is equally or more important in order to grasp the meaning of our interlocutor's message. In spite of this, language (spoken or written) arrives to us very directly

and either encourages the desire to continue to communicate with our interlocutor or hinders this relationship.

In order to complete our analytical perspective when dealing with this theme, we would like to point out, moreover, that throughout the history of philosophy theoretical connections have been established between language and the ethical dimension of man. Words, exclusively of human beings, transcend the level of communication of natural needs and achieve their specific peculiarity when they enable and name moral and ethical estimations. We would agree with the perspective on "the ethics of language", i.e. a proposal that aims to underline that the pragmatic use of language (in our case television language) involves an ethical dimension that cannot be ignored.

Within the ethics of language, there are two highly interesting proposals that can offer us insight for our analysis. Although in this text we will not develop them, we would like to mention them here and present some of their ideas. These are Habermas' theories of communicative action and the ethical theory of Levinas. "Talking to someone, using a language pragmatically to establish an intersubjective relationship, presupposes a dual layer of communication: the level of what is said and the fact of saying it to someone" (Rojas, 2000). For both authors, language, before it can be conceived as a mirror of reality, must be understood from the interpersonal dimension it necessarily opens up and embodies. Hence television language acquires this ethical dimension that these authors talk about, as it is very clear about who its recipients are and how they can incorporate it both into their way of interpreting the world and also into how they communicate with others.

Definition of coarse language

In the article, we are interested in showing the relationship established between three of the concepts we have referred to in the introduction; i.e. the relationship established between language, television and present-day culture as an indicator of a society's ethical values. That is why we will start our discourse by clarifying what we mean by "coarse" language.

We know that language is a cultural product, one of the results of the historical interaction between people, even a

tool for survival. It is therefore changing and dynamic over time. Semiotics distinguishes three instances: language, tongue and speech, which can help us in our analysis. Language is the abstract instance, where the things found by people over centuries of verbal interaction are crystallised and from where they are defended. It is the synchronic instance where the rules of grammar and syntax are assigned that become a "must". At a secondary level, tongue is each of the peculiarities acquired by language according to the physical and cultural area where it is generated, flourishes and is established; it's the territory of different languages. And, lastly, speech is the appropriation and practical specification a person makes of this language acquired through education and living together with other people; it is the pragmatic instance, diachronic, it is use and abuse and, above all, it is the appropriation of a tongue.

Although experts state that language is confined to the sphere of education and speech to that of the media, it's very difficult to separate the permanent symbiosis they have. For this reason, television is not a place where this "must" is taught or introduced but it becomes a laboratory where the variety of games and transformations suffered by language during speaking can be observed and recorded. We should investigate to what degree the language of television reflects, as some would claim, what happens in society or to what degree it generates it. However, language is not totally separate from education or ethics because its impoverishment on television concerns us not only as educators but also as citizens of a country.

When we review, as is our intent in a moment, the language being employed in a sample of programmes, we will surely be able to establish what is happening with the language and tongue of our country, we will verify whether this kind of language has been incorporated into everyday speech and also to what extent coarse language is present.

It is quite complex to define what coarse language is. As also happens with many of the concepts related to social and human sciences, when we try, we come across difficulties resulting from the concept's ambiguity. This ambiguity comes from the diverse approaches to reality, i.e. it depends who is making the definition and how it is used in its context. However, a coarse word in a group of people aged 20-30 is not valued in the same way as in another group aged 12-20 or by children aged 4 to 12. Evidently,

neither is it the same for those aged over 30. Possibly, if we carried out a survey among people of different ages, asking them to rate whether terms were coarse or not, in many cases we would find ratings from 0 to 10. In other words, some would not consider the words as coarse language whereas others would shudder on hearing them.

The second difficulty we are referring to is directly related to the ideologies, beliefs and convictions of people due to which we can observe great variability within the same group of the population, for example among adults. In fact, some have even established a relationship between this and people's level of education, and this means we run the risk of labelling or being labelled quickly. So better educated people would talk better than badly educated people. But it is very risky to refer to someone in these terms because who establishes when someone is well or badly educated? And, what does it mean, to be well or badly educated? Are there absolute criteria for this theme? Or is it quite the opposite and, consequently, is this issue totally relative? We shall leave it there because we are referring to a debate that is too weighty to clarify in just a couple of lines, although our position may be perceived throughout the article, which we state here, namely that we believe there are some minimum criteria and values that allow us to coherently structure the diversity of educational models.

We can add a further element, the factor of time, which reveals itself in the acceptance of the variability of the definition. There is a dynamic in the rating of words, which seem to be "living" concepts because they are in "interaction" with the society of the time. So it seems that we can also establish a relationship between the characteristics of a society and the type of language employed.

A swear word or, more precisely, an ugly word, is a common term used to describe the words of coarse language. But which items we can place in the sack of coarse language or not is a cultural convention and, therefore, we cannot ignore the characteristics of the society at any specific time.

So-called swear words are often merely awkward expressiveness, anaemia, the incapacity to express oneself orally so that use is made of the language of monosyllables, gestures and shouts. Many television channels do not even have a minimum code of ethics, although apparently there are regulations that are hardly complied with, supremely manifested in coarse words and offensive gestures.

Menéndez Pidal, a writer from the '98 generation, spoke of three kinds of languages: educated language, popular language and vulgar language. But we should also add another at a lower level: coarse language, which reveals the intellectual paucity of many participants in the life of today's television, in addition to their lack of responsibility and ethics. In the same respect, we can also add the phrase by Alfonso Reyes, a Mexican poet from the beginning of the 20th century, who stated that "when tongues are spoiled, peoples are spoiled".

Coarse language is therefore related to vulgarity, as the word 'coarse' means 'wanting in fineness, delicacy'. And it is logically the opposite of what is fine, polished and classic.

Coarse is any behaviour, manifestation or word that does not correspond to delicacy, to what is refined, to courtesy or good manners. But, we ask ourselves again... what is vulgar? Or, put another way: who dares to say that something is coarse or not? It is difficult to set ourselves up as judges of anything like that when we know of examples from history that make us doubt such categorical statements. Vincent van Gogh, as the rest of the impressionist painters, was one of the coarsest painters, as impressionism replaced soft, delicate and fine brushes with others that were thick, dense and strong. Consequently, what we consider as coarse depends on various factors, as mentioned above.

We must be aware that the media have been an essential factor in the evolution of taste and in the aesthetic education of the masses, both due to their own creations and products and also due to the implicit or explicit judgements that form the basis of their messages. The simple fact of presenting a dress design as worthy of attention, or a way of talking, a way of behaving, means disseminating a certain taste or preference. There are coarse words that stop being coarse over time because they become part of the cultural heritage of a society; i.e. they stop being considered negative and are given, in their meaning, the character of a democratic expression. Vulgar, from the Latin *vulgare*, means the act of making something public and, therefore, the words we include in the category of coarse language can stop belonging to this category if they are assimilated by popular culture and their negative character disappears.

Edgar Morin (1966, pp. 69-70, quoted in Sánchez Noriega, 1997) points out four processes in vulgarisation: 1) the simplification of the original work which is not due to a

technical need to change format or genre but to mass consumption; 2) Manichaeism, when a dramatic conflict appears with emphasised profiles where good and bad fight it out; 3) updating introduces contemporary sensibilities into classic works and personalities and dramatisations are designed according to present-day tastes, and 4) modernisation transfers the actions of the past to the present day.

The culture of bad taste or *kitsch* (Eco, 1977, pp. 79-151) is one of the main results of dissemination that attempts to put the discoveries of timeless culture within reach of everyone. What is *kitsch* does not only depend on the message but also on the attitude of the consumer, which can turn a true work of art into fetish in the process of reception.

In an article published in *La Vanguardia* (04/09/07), Joan Jiménez, referring to this point, commented that "vulgarity has been taken over by television. The harshness, ordinariness, bad taste, coarse foul language has its place in the general nature of the programmes that television injects us with on a daily basis, both public and private".

Coarse television language therefore encodes particular positions, beliefs and prejudices, verbal conduct aimed at rebellion, the absence of authority, ease, money and sex. Often the verbal transgression suggests an ideology that is trying to convey a revolt against authority, that which is established, that which is measured. For example, Bart Simpson, from the popular series *The Simpsons*, uses simple coarse language, anti-language, characterised by short exchanges with a lack of information. They are basic dialogues in which a lot of misunderstanding, superposition and overlap occur, a constant search for one to impose himself on the other. The new television anti-hero follows his own rules and, in his own way, makes fun of the system.

Television language and vicarious learning

Given all we have talked about above, we would like to ask a question: can we therefore manage to identify any characteristic of the definition of coarse words that we can share, leaving to one side the different approaches to reality, different ideologies, beliefs and variation due to time?

From our point of view, there are elements that can identify the definition and that remain constant. To start with, let us

ask the reader the following question: what bothers us about coarse language? Possibly, the different answers imply, one way or another, a consideration of values. We are referring to respect, to oneself or to another, or more precisely a lack of respect that we attribute to the coarse word. That is what stops us from considering it as part of our cultural heritage and, on the other hand, that makes us perceive it as a threat.

Once again we repeat the idea that the media play a very important role in the socialisation of norms and expectations regarding conduct. From this point of view, social sciences show that individual psychological varieties are never the sole basis of opinions and that the behaviour of individuals depends on social norms, role systems, social controls and hierarchies of social position. In other words, on consensual validation exercised by the reference group on these norms, attitudes and opinions. Specifically, the media have two basic effects on behaviour related to norms, attitudes, opinions, sentiments, feelings and emotions (DeFleur/Ball-Rokeach, 1982, pp. 332-334, quoted in Bryant and Zillman, 1996): the activation or setting up of a behaviour as a consequence of mass messages, and the deactivation of carrying out a certain behaviour, also as a consequence of this kind of message.

Bandura's cognitive social theory (1994) also explains the kind of influence acquired by television models on people's verbal and non-verbal behaviour. The models' actions assume the power to activate and guide behaviour when, in the eyes of the viewers, they are good predictors that they will obtain positive results if they act in a similar way. The fashion industry and that of "good" taste are based on the model's power to induce society.

In any case, the models' influences act in different ways: as tutors, inhibitors, releasers, social prompters and inciters of emotion, enhancing values and conceptions of reality that can function separately but that are often done together. So the modelling of coarse language is based on the showing of television models that use and promote the use of this language and even its social dissemination.

Coarse language: an ethical indicator of society

The media's influence on the school population is without doubt. We could give many examples taken from everyday

life. Neither do we need to remind people that the task faced nowadays by teachers to educate children according to a scale of values that is increasingly more difficult to justify is very arduous, because often the positive values, the desirable ones, such as justice, dignity, responsibility, freedom, fairness and respect, among others, are not easy to transmit or achieve. It even seems that have an instinctive tendency towards negative values, not only because these involve less effort or no effort at all but also because today's society encourages them, such as egoism, effortlessness, violence, consumerism, etc., with the help of the media.

We have consented to the media invasion into our customs and values for so long that it is now taken as read that expecting to be treated with respect by others, expecting good taste in a conversation and a little honesty, are antiquated and out of place.

The problem is that this is not only a question of swear or coarse words but rather it all goes much deeper. Uncontrolled exposure to television programmes where there is an exaggerated extravagance of this kind of words can lead to a significant vicarious effect, especially at school age. This is no longer a question of fashion or fleeting custom: we are faced with a whole philosophy of life, a culture promoted not only by television shows but also by the press and advertising, and this means there is an excessive tendency to accept as normal what actually seems to be exceptional.

In any case, boys and girls are not the only ones subjected to the deforming pressure of the media. Their mothers, fathers and teachers also watch television. Although they are older, this does not mean they are any less impressionable, even though it may only be due to exhaustion given the infinite repetition of concepts or the intellectual saturation induced on always receiving the same stereotypes, the same opinions, the same vulgar and coarse language. Often the media are not questioned and neither are their messages. They have convinced us that what they are doing is the only thing possible and, what they are showing, the only thing that exists.

But what values does television transmit? To answer this question, we should introduce the following consideration: first of all, television does not attempt to transmit positive values and its effect will depend not so much on the content of the television programmes but on the mental

predisposition to watch television, i.e. on the personal and social conditions of how television is watched, of being susceptible to the kind of content shown on it. But if we are to relate coarse television language with the values of a democratic and pluralist society where different ways of approaching life co-exist, the first thing we ask ourselves is how to characterise their interaction, how we can establish this relationship, what values we put into play. Directly, we see the value of respect is connected, as taking into account the needs and feelings of the other is a backdrop to the use of this kind of language although, as we have said before, it can be a question of moment, of the time we live in. But this does not mean we should close our eyes to this situation, as the future of citizenry is at stake.

Educating a citizenry that is critical of the media

We must not forget that television is, at the very least, an accomplice in the society we have. Fortunately, television is not homogeneous and neither is society. There are different ways of relating us to it, different kinds of content or ideological relationships. We can therefore strengthen the critical capacity of our citizenry through television.

If we think about television, we realise that, although the images are very important, they are always accompanied by language. In the case of films and series, which is our pre-sent object of study, language is reflected in the dialogues carried out by the protagonists. When we perceive that what they are saying is attacking us, that we don't like it, that it offends our sensibilities, this is because, for us, they are using coarse language. And, directly, we associate it to the bad quality of the production or the medium.

In February 2005, the *Diari de Barcelona* already noted that the quality of television programmes is one of the main concerns of the audience in Catalonia, where 7 out of 10 people felt that trash TV had increased considerably over the previous year, and that it was therefore necessary to regulate programmes promoting this kind of television. This was revealed by the latest public opinion poll carried out by the Audiovisual Council of Catalonia (CAC), reflecting the concerns of society regarding the role of the media and based on a survey carried out on 1,600 people of legal age.

The report points out that 74% of the population has the impression that the broadcasting of programmes such as *Gran Hermano* (Big Brother), *Crónicas Marcianas* or *Tómbola* has increased over the last year. What bothers Catalans about most of the trash TV programmes is that celebrities are created without any kind of professional or artistic merit, as well as the fact that they use coarse language. We therefore associate trash TV with coarse language (among other factors).

What can we do, then, with a situation like this? One of the possible answers is provided by the different actions or recommendations carried out by the CAC, in looking for ways to regulate the appearance of coarse language in certain programmes and, principally, in specific time bands. However, in addition to the need for bodies like the CAC to intervene in protected time bands, we must also consider that the target for this time slot is watching increasingly more television at other times, when the plan is not to regulate coarse language. Therefore, we must think of something else that allows us to have a clear conscience; that, as a community or as an educating society, we are doing what we can to ensure minimum levels for children and young people. In fact, this is perceived as even more urgent when we realise that these children and young people are precisely the citizens of tomorrow. Hence the urgent need to ensure they do not incorporate into their cultural heritage certain coarse words or expressions that show a lack of respect towards themselves or others. When we hear conversations by young people who are friends, and we hear them insult each other as a form of address, without using their name and only to call attention to themselves, we notice an increased relativism in formal language and the feelings we attribute to it.

A society moved by relative values runs the risk of not finding a way to create a bridge between different ways of life and, although it's true that young people and adults have different views of what it means to live in society, it is also true that it's our job to take on the responsibility of creating the conditions that allow their set of values, their model of life to be constructed, making it compatible with that of others. Respect and responsibility are values that go, or should go, hand in hand with any democratic society that wishes to achieve better community spirit and for which, if necessary, the necessary instruments will be found to

transform it. It is at this point where something needs to be said and we have to say it, all of us who feel we are involved in education.

We like Nicolás Lorite's expression when defending the active pedagogy of television language which, although he describes this for university students, we believe conveys the basis of what represents, for us, a personal involvement in education for children that is responsible and that respects children and ensures they are also respectful and responsible.

It's true that active pedagogy is based on practice, experience, context and dialogue and, being based on this, it extracts something more conceptual or abstract; i.e. it manages to achieve assimilation via reflection, motivated by personal interest and based on the significance of what is presented.

As coarse language is present on television, our mission will consist of ensuring that it is not perceived as something natural in relations between people.

We are facing a process of transmitting values, uses and customs with which we are constantly bombarded, be we rich or poor, rural or urban, young or old. The informal education this provides us with is as or more relevant than the moral training or creation of good habits in new generations that we hope to carry out in the home and at school. It is therefore a question of a truly hidden curriculum, led by the interests, often financial, of a few.

Our objective is lofty because it aims for an education in values based on a critical approach to television programmes, to their quality and the relation this has with the common theme, the cultural density, the humour it presents and the kinds of language used. So it is not so much a question of banning certain programmes but of educating those who watch them. Coercive measures do not make sense in a society where information is within reach of everyone very quickly, because this would entail, for young people, an added value of "the risk of doing what cannot be done". From our point of view, coarse language will no longer be used on television when it is no longer something that identifies a sector of the population, perceived as a group symbol. Those who watch certain programmes already share something and this feeling of belonging means that they generalise it and also employ it in everyday contexts.

As a result of all the above, we would like to note some

ideas we feel might be taken up again in order to plan the active pedagogy of television language:

- Use the context and talk, truly giving them a voice, in order to know what interests them in certain programmes. Coarse language might be a significant element but not the main one.
- Analyse together the plot of different series and their characters.
- Question the formal discourse of opposed characters to extract from this the characteristics attributed to them.
- Look for a model of positive characteristics for young people that does not employ coarse language.
- Present programmes that are different to those they normally watch and analyse them together to establish connections with their reality.

But the work of educators is not enough. We need to reinforce these good intentions with state policy, i.e. with the full will of organised society, promoting a plan that tackles all fronts - family, school and community - and that imposes game rules instead of subjecting them to the designs of a certain sector. In short, to achieve the true expression of an educating society.

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