
Still... the power of words

Marius Schattner



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“Our enemies called us terrorists. People who were neither friends nor enemies (...) also used this Latin name, either under the influence of British propaganda or out of habit. Our friends (...) called us by a simpler, through also a Latin name: patriots.”

Menachem Begin, The Revolt, story of the Irgun

- 1 Images, as we say in French *ne parlent pas d'elles-mêmes*, “do not talk for themselves”, even when pictures are taken on the spot, transmitted without the slightest delay, without editing or, at least, apparent editing. The words still tell the story, reveal the background, give the meaning and mark memory when associated with images. This is true for every modern conflict, but even more so for the Israeli-Palestinian conflict.
- 2 Are the words so powerful because this confrontation appears as “*unbalanced conflict*”, which cannot be solved by the power of weapons alone, with no real winners or losers on the field, so that the issue depends largely on the perception that we get from it?
- 3 Or, may be, because the tremendous emotional and symbolic power of the words in a battle field taking place in the Promised Land of the Jews, the Holy Land of three monotheistic religions?
- 4 Anyway as journalists who are expected to have an impartial view, who are free of prejudices, uninfluenced by our different backgrounds, and if not necessarily neutral, at least honest. But we find ourselves, against our wishes, in a position no more of being spectators but rather of being actors, summoned to taking sides, just by the word we use. And the fact that journalists are more and more pressed to write in the shortest possible way, in a *Novololange* adapted for television, smartphones and the Internet, make their task ever more difficult, thus increasing the danger of simplification.
- 5 So let us try to decipher by a limited number of examples some of the semantic dilemmas to which the journalist is confronted daily, including dilemmas (and mistakes) stemming

from translation. We may roughly differentiate between names of places, of people, of actions.

Places

- 6 We use the wording of the international community: “West Bank” and not “Judea and Samaria” – a term which was introduced by Israel after the Six Day War of June 1967, based on the biblical terminology. “Judea” and “Samaria” each have of course historical, religious and geographical meanings. But their association in a single word is new and was imposed to public radio and television by the Israeli political Right, when it came to power in May 1977.
- 7 We use the term “*settlements*” (“implantations” or “colonies de peuplement” in French), which is the translation of *Yishuv* or *Hitnahalut*, and not the term “Jewish communities”, which appears in Israeli army communiqués (in English but not in Hebrew) – especially when these so-called “communities” are attacked by Palestinians, thus implying that they are victim of hatred of Jews.
- 8 The people who live in settlements are “*settlers*”. Translated in French the word is “*colon*”. It is true that since the Algerian Independence war, the word “*colon*” has in French a negative connotation, but there is no other word in French except “*colon*” for the people living in settlements.
- 9 We call the territories conquered in the Six Day War and under Israel control till today “*occupied*” and not “*administrated*” – a term used by the Israeli authorities, for these territories are under military occupation, against the will of the native population even though certain zones are “*autonomous*”. By the same logic, we specify that East Jerusalem is “*annexed*” and “*occupied*” and not “*reunified*”. We call the new Jewish neighborhoods built in East Jerusalem after 1967 “*urban settlements*” (“*quartiers de colonisation*”) for the same reason, though the Israeli government and the Israeli municipality of Jerusalem insist that they have to be called as just “*neighborhoods*”, so not to differentiate between them and the Jewish neighborhoods in West Jerusalem.
- 10 Because Jerusalem is not recognized till today as the capital of Israel by the international community, we avoid expressions which are frequently used in French such as when the name of the capital is a substitute to the name of the country (like “*Washington announce*”; “*Paris s’oppose*”, etc.).
- 11 There are of course ambiguities, which are basically political, and may be source of confusion, like the term “*Palestine*”. Ironically, till the creation of the Jewish State in 1948, the Zionist movement used the term extensively. During the British Mandate between 1922 and 1948, “*Palestine*” meant the sliver of land between the Mediterranean Sea and the Jordan River – nowadays Israel, the West bank, the Gaza Strip. It was translated to Hebrew by the word *Eretz Israel* in official documents and on stamps. Today, especially in reference to a future Palestinian state, it can mean only the West Bank, and Gaza. When people call in demonstrations for “*Free Palestine*”, it is not very clear what land they have in mind.

People

- 12 How, in a single word, to call the Palestinians engaged in violent actions against Israel: “*fighters*”? (which suggests “*freedom fighters*”), “*résistants*” in French? (with its very positive connotation), “*guerilla*”, or “*terrorist*” as they are called most of the time by Israeli authorities and media? Should the authors of these attacks be qualified as “*activists*” or “*militants*” (words which have different meanings in French and in English) or “*terrorists*”, especially when they commit suicide attacks?
- 13 Of course it depends on the context, where an attack takes place, in Israel or in occupied territory, against whom, civilians or military. Who puts a bomb in a public bus in an Israeli town commits evidently an act of terrorism. But the one who opens fire against a military patrol or even kidnap a soldier? And how to call this soldier: a prisoner or a hostage?
- 14 In many cases the borderline is not crystal clear. So press agencies avoid using words which are too emotionally charged, like “*terrorist*” or even more so, “*terrorist group*” (with the exception of al Qaeda in the wake of 9/11).
- 15 They do not use the word “*freedom fighters*” or “*martyrs*” (*shahid*) to qualify a Palestinian killed by Israelis, while in the Arab media the word “*shahid*” describes both a child killed by an Israeli bomb and a suicide bomber.

Actions

- 16 Helped by pro-Palestinians activists, people in the Palestinian villages of B’ilin or Nahalin west of Ramallah demonstrate regularly against the confiscation of land for the sake of the nearby Israeli settlement or the building of the fence. At the end of the weekly demonstrations, youngsters or children throw stones; the army fires back, avoiding in principle the use of lethal weapons. Yet people are killed. How to call them? The army call these demonstrations “*violent riots*” (implying that there are non violent riots), the demonstrators call them “*peaceful demonstrations*”. Here again the journalist is faced with a dilemma. And is it just a “*security fence*” that Israeli has completed, or an “*Apartheid wall*”, as the Palestinians call it? So we use the more general word “*separation fence*”.
- 17 Describing military operations involves similar questions. It is often written that Palestinian “*launched rockets from Gaza*” and Israeli “*reacted*”, while the chain of attack and response is more complex: for Palestinians also respond. But it is true that the initiative mostly comes from Palestinian armed groups who consider that they “*respond*” to Israeli occupation.
- 18 Of course we could provide many more examples. There is also an important element in the “*war of words*” – in which journalists are on front line: The necessity to be fast, to impress the public, while news sadly become some sort of “*reality show*” in a region where tension seems always to be on the rise. Tension which is slowing down is no news: “*when it bleeds it leads*”.

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ABSTRACTS

Images, as we say in French *ne parlent pas d'elles-mêmes*, "do not talk for themselves". The words still tell the story. This is true for every modern conflict, but even more so for the Israeli-Palestinian one. One of the reasons being the tremendous emotional and symbolic power of the words in a battle war taking place in the Promised land of the Jews, the Holy Land of three monotheistic religions. Anyhow, as journalists we are expected to have an impartial view, free of prejudices, uninfluenced by our different backgrounds, and if not necessarily neutral, at least honest. But we find ourselves, in position no more of spectators but actors, summoned to taking sides, just by the word we use. So let us try to decipher by a limited number of examples some of the semantics dilemmas the journalist is daily confronted, including in translation.

Les images, on ne le sait que trop bien, "ne parlent pas d'elles-mêmes". Associés aux images, les mots pour le dire gardent leur poids. C'est vrai pour tous les conflits modernes. C'est particulièrement vrai pour le conflit israélo-palestinien ne serait-ce qu'à cause de la charge émotionnelle de la Terre Sainte. Les observateurs neutres, impartiaux, libérés des préjugés, que sont censés être les journalistes, se trouvent ainsi bon gré malgré dans un rôle d'acteurs, ne seraient ce que par les mots qu'ils utilisent. Je tente de décrypter par un nombre limité d'exemples les stratégies sémantiques de chaque camp et expliquer les choix et dilemmes auquel le journaliste est confronté, y compris dans les traductions.

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