

Primitive peoples, civilized peoples Ideologies underlying documental languages

Lic. Edgardo Civallero
Nacional University of Córdoba (Argentina)
edgardocivallero@gmail.com

Abstract

Documental languages constitute *controlled* terms ensembles, which allow to describe the content of different information holders. They categorize the reality, by selecting from it some relevant aspects which may facilitate the knowledge management. Their descriptors – highly representative- allow to organize and recover the human intellectual product.

The possibility of *deciding* the inclusion or exclusion of elements which describe some aspects of human life lead to consider that the building process of these tools is not neutral, being exposed to the influence of dominant ideologies. Even if this fact represents a natural condition of intellectual human work, and may not render in a problematic situation, some ideological positions perpetuate attitudes of discrimination, exclusion, pressure or power, affecting several social sectors, and being reflected in many documental languages.

Through the analysis of an specific example –found in UDC auxiliar tables- this article alerts and opens the debate on the importance of such influences and on the need of building control instruments and permanent evaluation forums, in order to obtain a high level of neutrality and ethical engagement in the contents of the tools of documental work.

Key-words

Ideology – Documental languages – Discrimination - Evolutionism

Introduction

Cultural anthropology, evolutionism and “savages”

Anthropology is usually defined as the Science of the Man. Such a complex object of study compelled this discipline to subdivide itself, alongside its history, into specialized branches occupied in aspects like physical features, material past, languages or culture. The latter was endorsed to Cultural Anthropology, whose origin as a scientific study is historically tied with the imperialistic expansion of Western Europe during XVIII-XIX centuries (1 : 61).

In fact, the series of exploration travels inaugurated by Spain and Portugal in the middle of XV century had an important sequel in the enterprises of other european nations, eager to emulate the economical, political and military achievements of the Iberian powers. France, England, Holland, Belgium and even Italy threw themselves into the survey and occupation of overseas territories. This actions implicated the contact with different races, civilizations and cultures, very distinct in organization, ways of life, languages and customs, from the western european model.

The account of travelers, explorers, adventurers and missionaries about the new lands and the new peoples were not slow to arrive, and became a real literary corpus which set a real style. Science did not fail to make the best use of the contributions of such an

abundance of data: in fact, remarkable personalities of the size of Charles Darwin started their scientific careers as simple travelers, mindful observers of a universe still unknown for the –certainly limited- minds of a rising Modern Europe.

The myriad of human phenomena that opened out in front of the eyes of these inquisitive intellects grew up as far as the records on their maps. The military and political goals advanced at the same rate. Colonialistic regimes were installed in broad territories previously appertaining to local groups or states, with such political consequences as occupation and later exploitation. Every population who pit against the newcomers were submitted, expelled or simply eliminated; over the rest, less direct pressures were exercised: leaders management, peoples division, acculturation and destruction of response capacity, through the elimination of social structures (1 : 42).

Cultural anthropology arose in this context, and worked under the aegis of imperialistic powers. The scientific labour and goals of recognizing cultures distinct from the european, comparing and understanding them, was profitted by occupation powers, which, at the same time, restricted the movements and the financing of the anthropologists, even limiting their work to some subjects “of interest” (2 : 63).

Obviously, the theoretical and analytical frames and the research problems selected by these researchers of men and their culture were deeply influenced by ideologies ruling during XVIII-XIX centuries. Thus arose *evolutionism*, one of the main schools of thought in cultural anthropology, which was a result from the ideas rising in this period. As early as 1855, sociologist Herbert Spencer maintained that societies, as living organisms, progress from simple to complex forms. The representative figures of this movement (among them, the outstanding Morgan, Tylor and Lubbock) developed an evolutive scheme with a series of stages, from “savagery” to “civilization”, passing through “barbarism”. This conversion from single to complex was, according to these authors, an unavoidable fact, something like the “natural doom” of humankind. Both Tylor and Morgan pointed that the “primitive” man is to the “civilized” man as the child to the adult (3 : 40-44), and that evolution is a process similar to the growth and the passage from childhood (“savagery”) to adulthood.

In his book *Primitive Cultures* (1871), Edward Tylor wrote:

“By simply placing [European] nations at one end of the social series and savage tribes at the other, [and] arranging the rest of mankind between these limits (...) ethnographers are able to set up at least a rough scale of civilization (...) [representative of] a transition from the savage state to our own”. (1871 : 26-27, quoted in 4 : 42).

“Backward” populations were seen as objects of a inevitable transformation. The purpose to achieve: urban society, industrial and paid work, monotheism, monogamy, state-like social organization, and the dressing and education ways of civilized people (2 : 43). The origin of this evolutive process did not matter: they were destined to arrive where the “advanced” peoples (European societies) arrived.

Lloberas (3 : 374) points:

“‘Primitive` were not seen as complete human beings, and, consequently, it was justified to dominate them, to treat them as objects, to destroy them, to exploit them and even to study them”.

These “primitive societies” were labeled as “inferior races” (Lubbock), “savages”, “illiterate societies” or “simple societies”, terms loaded with negative values and an undeniable pejorative tint. Through them, western societies expressed their belief in their total superiority over others cultures, a superiority already expressed during XVI century, when the most brilliant Spanish minds of this period discussed at length on the human or animal nature of the indigenous communities of the New World.

Thus, Cultural Anthropology consolidated its scientific status during a historical moment when a great part of the human universe was subordinated to the designs of a few nations with a high coercive power, and when millions of individuals were dispossessed of their resources, their beliefs and even their lives. Such a remarkable anthropologist as Levi-Strauss pointed that the anthropology was a daughter of the violence, of a period which a part of the humankind treated the other part as an object.

Evolutionism extended from the second half of XIX century until the World War I. With its emphasis in evolutive stages and its insistence in the huge differences between Western people and “inferior races”, it justified the policies of colonization, for the advantages that civilization would bring to the peoples in the low stages of the evolutive scale (3 : 377).

The problem

Evolutionist ideas included in documental languages

Evolutionist ideas were criticized by posterior thought currents; some positions, as Lubbock’s one, were openly calified as deterministic and ethnocentric. The concepts were substituted by new terms created by diffusionism, structuralism and other anthropological movements.

However, these ideas still survive today under other forms and other words: they are revealed in certain international policies, in phenomena as racism or discrimination, in social or sexual exclusion, in the oblivion of indigenous populations, in the existence of deep diferences among the different world societies and in the persistent use of expressions like “underdeveloped countries” or “Third World”.

Curiously, some documental languages maintain, among their descriptors on human societies classification, elements like *primitive races and peoples* (=081), *developing peoples* (=083), *highly developed peoples* (=084).and even *colonial races and peoples* (=1-5), specific cases found in the auxiliari tables 1f (*Common auxiliaries of race, ethnic grouping and nationality*) of the Universal Decimal Classification (UDC).

Let us remember that a documental language is a code employed by information units for the intellectual treatment of documents, by describing their content in order to manage it (5 : 137). The main feature of the descriptors composing a documental language (which differentiate them from the words of a natural language) is that they are *controlled*, i.e. consciously chosen by professionals, among all the terms of a language, for representing reality univocally (i.e. without ambiguity), in a condensed, accurate and simple way, keeping the richness of the original information and erasing the possibilities of association or repetition (5 : 138). Terms selection implies the reduction of a natural language volume, because synonyms, non-important terms and non-sustantive grammatical categories are not included.

It would be expected that these artificially-built languages –even if natural language terms originated them- were ideologically neutral, i.e., that they not include in their tables

terms loaded of values or related to ideologies which establish inequality, unbalance, discrimination or another offensive attitudes. An ensemble of words specially selected for representing the reality in a resumed form, should not reflect any of these positions.

However, the quoted examples point to the contrary. UDC auxiliary tables 1f include, as shown above, terms clearly related with evolutionist postures, coming from an ideological frame of domination, colonization and discrimination. Such words are used as pertinent terms for the classification of human societies. Superficial reviews of other areas of the UDC and of others documental languages (LCC, DDC, Latin American LEMB, etc.) produced similar results.

Discussion

Is ideological neutrality possible?

Ideologies are ensembles of values and beliefs shared by most of the integrants of a society. Every group possess its own ideology, usually assimilated in a unconscious way during socialization period, and seldom analysed or questioned. This hidden and underlying scheme made of assumptions shapes, according to philosopher Louis Althusser, the universe of images and conceptions that certain group has about reality; it models attitudes to the world and builds personalities. By structuring the opinion that individuals have on a wide range of topics, it also configures their actions.

Marxists point that these series of ideas constitute the basis of the “public opinion”, this common sense that is invisible for most of the people, untouchable and unquestionable, and which invades every moment of the daily life. Such concepts –philosopher Michel Foucault says- are intended as *neutrals*, i.e., as the natural, just and correct form of understanding the universe and acting in relation to it.

These elements and processes cannot be considered as problematics if they do not generate attitudes which could be hostile or prejudicial for any individual or group. When these latter case is presented, the negative connotations of these underlying ideas – “natural”, “neutral”, “right” and “correct” ideas- may compel complete societies to act in a unbalanced way, harming certain collectives or social sectors. A daily example may be the immanent machism presented in many societies, which act depriving of possibilities and horizons to a wide number of women. More severe cases drive to ethnocide, *apartheid* or racist policies.

Examples chosen for the elaboration of this article clearly demonstrate the concepts exposed in the previous paragraphs. In a documental tool, *supposedly neutral and representative* descriptors were included, standardizing a classification of human beings in groups, clearly influenced by an ideology (*evolutionism*) that have dark antecedents and that, as pointed above, has not disappeared yet.

To classify a people as “primitive” or “colonial” (in opposition to “developed” or “*highly* developed”) implies to establish mental (and physical) labels and differences – simply accepted as “natural” by the society who generated these tools- that make wider the distances among human beings, and perpetuates policies of hatred, marginalization, exclusion, contempt and violence policies, that have sadly marked the pages of the History.

Certainly, every human product (including this article) reflects, in an automatic way, the ideology of its creator, or the one which dominates a society during a determined period. It is almost inevitable that documental languages express such influences in their

structures. However, is highly concerning the presence of certain ideas and attitudes inside the work tools of the information professionals.

Conclusion

The need of control instances

The presented elements refer to a particular case included in a wider phenomenon, which affects every information professional and worker. The tools for documental analysis cannot reflect human negative trends, like repulse, sexism, hatress, discrimination or exclusion. Interdisciplinary and multicultural discussion forums must be generated for discussion, analysis and reflexion, and the active and permanent participation of the international librarianship community must be encouraged, in order to build a common space for the control and the criticism of the intellectual and ideological content of the most employed standard codes. Just by these means, an ensemble of words could be obtained, that reflect the reality in a clean and pertinent way, free of the contamination of human defects, weaknesses and past (or present) mistakes.

NB. In July 2005, the author –a member of the UDC Revision Advisory Committee– achieved, through this article, the cancellation of the quoted codes (and others) as they were non pertinent terms for ethnic or racial classification. From the 2005 edition of UDC's "Extensions and Revisions", these changes will be included, and ideas like *development* and *colonialism* will be accurately analysed and reflected as economic and political terms.

Bibliography (mainly in spanish)

- 1.- KROTZ, E. Viajeros y antropólogos : aspectos históricos y epistemológicos de la producción de conocimientos [Travellers and anthropologists : historical and epistemological aspects of knowledge production]. Nueva Antropología, 1998, vol.0 (33), México.
- 2.- KAPLAN, D.; MANNERS, R.A. Antropología : viejos temas y nuevas orientaciones. [Anthropology : old issues and new trends]. En: LLOBERAS, J.R. (editor). La Antropología como ciencia [Anthropology as science]. Barcelona; Anagrama, 1975.
- 3.- LLOBERAS, J.R. Algunas tesis provisionales sobre la naturaleza de la antropología [Some provisional thesis on Anthropology nature]. En: LLOBERAS, J.R. (editor). La Antropología como ciencia. Barcelona; Anagrama, 1975.
- 4.- HOLMES, L.D.; PARRIS, W. Anthropology : an introduction. (3^a.ed). New York; John Wiley & Sons, 1981.
- 5.- GUINCHET, C.; MENO, M. Introducción general a las ciencias y técnicas de la información y la documentación [General introduction to information and documentation sciences and techniques]. (2^a.ed.) Madrid; CINDOC (CSIC)/UNESCO, 1990.