

Mind formatting institutions

Dan S. Stoica – University “Alexandru Ioan Cuza” at Iasi

Abstract

Everywhere in the world, societies – acting as communities – set up institutions or just use already existing ones, leading to their own reproduction. This reality relies on the use of language, which not only influence people, but also socio-culturally shapes their minds. This paper has the goal of discussing mind formatting institutions that smoothly “manipulate” people into being “good citizens”, from their early ages to the end of their lives, thanks to language, understanding manipulation as a *amoral* tool. The most prominent mind formatting institutions are the family, the school, the church, the press and, crossing them all, language, understood as the mother tongue of a given community. Because it is about smooth influence, about manipulation, a possible new perspective over this instrument is presented. Cultural differences are also discussed, based upon differences between languages, highlighting them as instances of social representations.

Keywords

Manipulation, Mind formatting, Mind formatting institutions, Social representations..

Résumé

Partout dans le monde, les sociétés – agissant en tant que communautés – construisent des institutions ou les emploient pour se reproduire. Il s’agit d’une réalité fondée non seulement sur la capacité du langage d’influencer les gens, mais aussi sur la mise en forme des pensées grâce à la dimension socioculturelle. La présente étude a le but de discuter des institutions qui « manipulent » sournoisement les gens depuis leur plus tendre âge et jusqu’à la fin de leur vie, pour les transformer en “bons citoyens”, comprenant la “manipulation” en tant qu’outil *amoral*. Les plus connues de ces institutions de formatage mental [1] sont la famille, l’école, l’église, la presse et, surtout, la langue de chaque communauté. Compte tenu du fait qu’il s’agit d’influences sournoises, de manipulation, nous discutons la possibilité d’une nouvelle approche à l’égard du langage. Nous explorerons également les différences culturelles, telles qu’elles sont signalées dans les rapports entre les langues, soulignant la problématique des représentations sociales.

Mots-clés

Manipulation, formatage mental, institutions de formatage mental, représentations sociales.

INTRODUCTION

Mind formatting institutions are an undeniable reality all over the world, as societies – acting as communities – take care of preparing their members into being good citizens by coping with culture, traditions and the their way of life. The reproduction force of any society lies on this mechanism, and this is how we can identify the importance of such institutions. Some of these institutions work in the open, such as families, churches, schools. However, some others are not that visible because they are just part of who we are, acting nonetheless as segmenting criteria among the globe's population. Institutions are also studied by experts, such as the case of the mother tongue that we use to think and interact with one another. We all perceive that families, churches and schools format our minds, but there are very few who realize that language (understood here as the mother tongue) has the effect of formatting our minds, of shaping our thoughts, of marking our vision of the world and our way of interacting with other people. Indeed, the effect of reproducing a similar vision or way of interacting within the community we are part of what we call here “mind formatting”.

Mental formatting activities are a matter of officially, although tacitly accepted discursive manipulation, inflicted on large scale on people, combined with the power that languages have to impose distinct perceptions of the surrounding universe of each cultural community. Shared cultural specificities are rooted in the deep structure of our brains, mainly relying on the subconscious, and thus, can be perceived as stereotypes and prejudices guiding our behaviours (Gladwell, 2005). All kinds of discourse, in a given language, circulating within the population of a given community, will imprint the individuals in an imperceptible way. They make people become similar to one another, and feel like they are part of something bigger than what they can consciously perceive (Goffman, 1974). This mechanism relies on discourse, and that is the reason why we believe that this has to be the first thing we should look at. Then, we will discuss the concept of manipulation, as biases in discourse are frequently taken as such. We start by discussing the relationship between discourse and influence.

Discursive action is a complex activity, deployed between at least two individuals and acting simultaneously on the interlocutors' rational and emotional dimensions, in a given context. These two dimensions are never balanced and so the effect – the influence over the other – will either be the rational understanding of the thesis presented by the speaker, or the emotional engagement with the viewpoint expressed through discourse. As a sensitive activity, discourse also modifies the context in which it is produced, and changes lead the participants to eventually reconsider their positions (to oneself, to each other, concerning the matter under discussion, etc.). At any rate, discourse has an influential effect on people. Influence on the addressee, on the addresser himself [2], on the context, on understanding past discourse as well as on the construction and understanding of future discursive activities (Ricœur, 1997). We should keep in mind that all discursive activities influence people: they inform, move, produce

action or guide thoughts. Rational discursive activities can inform, teach, educate, but they can also seduce by the beauty of the ideas exposed and/or by the beauty of the logical ordering of ideas. Emotional discursive activities can seduce the addressees, meaning that they fall under emotional influence. However, they can also produce a rational effect due to the possibility that a cool-headed addressee, for instance, would ask himself or herself why it is that the addresser tells him or her something in a particular way. We always have, as poles, the speaker and the hearer, subjectivity and objectivity, melting together on both ends of the discursive activity. However, what happens when the target (the addressee) does not feel like being under the speaker's influence and believes that he/she is making his/her own decisions free from any possible pressure or guidance? That is what we should call "manipulation": a particular kind of influence on others that gives the impression that people make free choices when they actually do not, because they are bound to the social representations emerging from their culture.

MANIPULATION

The use of the term "manipulation" has come to a point where it seems to cover any immoral or wrong situation, or even inappropriate influence over others. While common discourse can contain utterances like "you are manipulating me", expert discourse should not take that as an acceptable term because we only deal with manipulation when the subject of such influence is not aware of what is happening to him/her. If we say "you are manipulating me", we are aware of what we are subject to, so the kind of influence exerted over us is no longer one of manipulation. The issue of manipulation is important because all institutions that we bring to your attention in this paper manipulate people to become "good" citizens. We stay in our *families* because we need help, protection, love (as we receive coaching for life); we go to *school* to learn things about the world we live in (and we get patriotic education and cultural branding and so forth); we go to *churches* to praise the Lord and to ask Him for guidance (and we also get culture- and social-wise guidance); we rely on the *press* to keep us informed (and so we can get priority lists to live by); and finally, we count on *language* to serve us in communicating with other people (and we do not really know what we are saying and cannot be one hundred percent sure of the content of communication or of what the others tell us). These are all institutions (some of them, clearly instated by communities, some just being there from the beginning of time) that are manipulative, not in somebody's hands, but in the hands of communities. The institutions named above deal with values that are not something that you teach at school. You "sneak" them into exchanges to make them smoothly accepted, to avoid opposition. It looks like manipulation, so this is an issue worth discussing here because it can be tailored and become different suits, appropriate to different situations.

Literature suggests that manipulation is always subject to moral defamation (Barnhill, 2015; Saussure & Schultz, 2005; Sălăvăștru, 2002; Tekin, 2010). Most authors

say that manipulation is bad because it is a way to deprive others of their freedom of choice. It is true that, in a strict and narrow politically correct approach, allowing people to make free options in any situation is the supreme value of a democratic society. This is probably why the term turned to be the equivalent of bad action against someone. However, this position can change, as it should. Romanian communication scholar Dumitru Borțun (2006) provides a solution that adds a different perspective on the object under study: manipulation would be just a tool, and should not be judged in moral terms. It is neither moral, nor immoral: it is simply *amoral*. What counts from an ethical point of view and could be discussed in terms of “moral” versus “immoral” is the goal of who is manipulating. According to Borțun (*op. cit.*), manipulation can only be discussed in terms of efficiency or inefficiency, adequacy or inadequacy, “good” or “bad”. That is, describing nothing else than the appropriateness and the efficiency of manipulation. Therefore, manipulation is a specific type of discursive tool able to exert influence over people. As such, it could only be judged to verify whether it fits a purpose and/or a context or not. In other words, manipulation should be evaluated only from the point of view of its capacity to convey a performative activity according to the choice of the interlocutors. If they perform efficiently, they are good. If they do not perform efficiently, they are bad. So, manipulation, as a tool, can be good or bad. But we should make no mistake here: the discussion is not about morality.

By this, we intend to do for manipulation the same kind of justice Perelman and Olbrechts-Tyteca (1976), along with the neo-rhetoric, did half a century ago for Rhetoric: it came to be no longer seen through what wrong readings on Aristotle were proposing as his views on logic, argumentation and persuasion. Rhetoric is no longer bad because it is only used to dissimulate one’s thoughts: it is the art of making efficient discourses. Ethically, the change was quite important, from lying to performing, from telling lies to the truth well told. In the same way, manipulation stops being just bad (ethically, morally) and begins to be evaluated in terms of efficiency (good or bad in achieving the action it has been called to do).

A TIME FOR EVERYTHING

There has to be a time for freedom of choice, and a time for manipulation, simply because telling the truth is not always the best option (Haines, 2011). Authors believe that using discourse for a purpose different from its mode of signifying is wrong because it counts as manipulation: misleading people by approaching them with discourse that do not seem to be what one should expect. According to our understanding, this position does not stand as a good theoretical approach because “distortions” conveyed in discourse are just a way of revealing different aspects of truth, of enhancing the efficiency of communication. It is not what is said, but how and why it is said. The “why” and “how” come together and they could explain the success of a discursive intervention. If we look into texts where changing the primary use of discourse is manipulating the receiver (Căprioară, 2009), then the conclusion is that, in order to be efficient, one should manipulate. If we accept the general idea that manipulating people is wrong, the

conclusion seems to be that one has to choose to be inefficient in their discursive activity because of ethic compelling laws (thus, moral principles). This discussion makes us think of discursive argumentation, whose only aim is efficiency. It is not about the truth or about ensuring the other’s freedom of choice. It is about performativity. We could look at examples and discussions from the perspective of the theories developed by Charles Morris (1946), mainly the discourse typology created by the American philosopher. We start by discussing his idea of “primary” versus “secondary” use of discourse.

Content analysis can be used to illustrate the advantage that people could have in preferring a secondary use of discourse over a primary one. In the years of 1940, it has been empirically shown that the interlocutors’ behaviour is influenced by the dominant features of the *ascriptors* meanings (Morris, 1940), if we are to use the author’s terminology. Moreover, it is influenced by the use of appropriate discourse. In Table 1, below, we can see how the modes of signifying things to the otherness are not dependent on the phrase structure, in the same way that meaning is determined by the grammar or by the linguistic structure of the phrase. One should not take the findings shown in this table as rules, as it has been verified in empirical observations that led to the well-known typology of discourse proposed by Charles Morris, where specific types of discourse can be found at the intersection point between some modes of signifying with some modes of use. In his proposal, Morris (1946) points to the primary uses (the use of a discourse is made in accordance with its mode of signifying) and the secondary ones (where the use of a given discourse has no direct relationship with its mode of signifying). The theory led to the conclusion that the secondary uses are more efficient than the primary ones, and that what was left to researchers was the practical verification of the theory.

Aim of the discourse	Type of discourse usually expected (inefficient, thus not recommended)	Type of discourse recommended (efficient)
Evaluation	Appreciative (as a mode of signifying)	Designative (seems to be objective – as in fiction)
Injunction	Prescriptive (as a mode of signifying)	Appreciative (which is perceived as less insistent, thus more persuasive, as in the moral discourse)
Information	Designative	Prescriptive (less theoretical, thus more convincing, like in the technological discourse)

Table 1 – Type of discourse: usually expected versus recommended (Morris, 1946).

So, according to Morris' experimental work (1946), in order to inform better one should use a type of discourse different from the designative, while to incite people one should avoid the prescriptive type of discourse and use any other type from the remaining three proposed in his scheme, and so forth. By describing an object in detail one could make it desirable and wanted by the hearer, more than if the speaker would just say "love it!", "take it!", "buy it". Maybe this is the reason why the Ten Commandments do not work as well as a trustful story would, if well told at the end of a religious service, say the homily. Instead of imperative formulas, the priest uses the technique of analogy, inviting the followers to find the truth and the solution to their problems by themselves, the same way people in the Holy Land might have found them in the past by paying attention to what the Lord was "telling". The effect is stronger, it marks the spirits and it stays there. The designative mode of signifying discourse in the homily proves to be more powerful than exhortations of any kind, even those coming from God!

The agenda setting tool used by the press (McCombs & Shaw, 1972; 1993) works in the same way: repeating some idea will place it among the priorities in the spirit of the public, while telling it, abruptly, that the idea in question has to be accepted as a priority might produce the opposite effect. In situations like those that occur in the classroom, for example, making an appreciative discourse about one object or person will make them be perceived as models to follow, so teachers should not have to go exhorting the students by saying "do the way the model does!", "keep your belongings in the state the model student does!". The students would simply want to get the same appreciative comments like the model and, for this to happen they will take the evaluation for an exhortation. The performative force of discourse would, thus, be much stronger. These remarks above lead us back to the main discussion proposed in this paper: is manipulation – understood as such – a bad thing? Or, to discuss it from another perspective: can we discuss manipulation in terms of morality? Once again, it seems to us that we cannot accept such kind of discussion because its premises are wrong: we cannot discuss a tool morally, in terms of "good" versus "bad". All we could do is to discuss "good" versus "bad" in terms of adequacy and efficiency. If it could serve the purpose it has been chosen for, then it would be fine, good. However, if it could not serve well enough that purpose, then it would be bad. By speculating on this, we have in mind the four types of manipulation model that could be found at the intersection point of efficiency and morality, as represented in Table 2 (p. 97).

Indeed, a big, sharp knife, when used by a skilled cook like Jamie Oliver, is efficient because it helps the gifted young chef to carry out lots of activities converging to excellent dishes. The same kind of knife is also good when used by a murderer in his action of killing some Midsomer inhabitant because the poor victim does not stand a chance. What we are discussing here is efficiency. Can we talk morality? Yes, of course. However, if we discuss the goals behind tool use, analysis results will not be the same: cooking is morally good because it leads to culinary pleasures and a healthy life, so the first use will be considered good from a moral viewpoint; killing people is morally wrong,

so the second use is not good. Although speculative, such standpoint could be of use in studies as a means of classifying discursive activities in which manipulative aims are at stake. The tool remains the same (a discourse or a sharp knife), and, thus, it is amoral. It can be good or bad, but only from the point of view of its capability to help interlocutors to perform a given activity. The goal in the use of a tool can also be good or bad, but this time the discussion is on morality. Discursive activities influence people, more (if they are acceptable and efficient) or less (if they are not so acceptable and not really efficient). Knives cut things, better (if they are sharp) or not that well (if they are not sharp).

	EFFICIENCY	Good	Bad
MORALITY			
Good		++	+ -
Bad		- +	- -

Table 2 – Types of manipulation.

Once we have shortly revisited discursive theory and have, hopefully, shed new light on the concept of manipulation, we can resume the discussion on mind formatting institutions by looking at some examples in which we apply the theoretical lens just discussed. Let's look at some mind formatting institutions at work, taking them as manipulation tools. The example of the *Cinecità Studios*, near Rome, in Italy, is illuminating. Benito Mussolini created the studios in 1937 as a means of propaganda to side with fascist ideas. *Il Duce* knew that "*Il cinema è l'arma più forte*" – "movies are the most powerful weapons" (Bondanella, 2009, p. 24) and he did not hesitate in making use of it. After the war, the Italians did not tear down the studios and are still using them to promote quite different ideas from those of the fascist Italy. Is it good to have studios like *Cinecità*? Although the answer is positive, from the moral viewpoint there is none because the existence of *Cinecità* itself is not something that we could discuss in terms of ethics and/or morality. *Cinecità* is just a tool and, as such, can be good or bad depending on the viewpoint of those who use it to serve the purpose it has been created for, which is

making movies. Does it fulfill that goal? If so, it is good. Was it good in the fascist era of Benito Mussolini? Yes, because Italians could make films there. If we move to the moral aspect of film production, discussing the goals behind the reason why movies are being made for, then we will see that in the late years of 1930 and the early years of 1940, the aim behind the use of *Cinecità* was obviously not good from the viewpoint of non-fascist people. But this, as we can see, is another discussion, which is no longer on the tool, but on its purpose [3]. Metonymically, we say that the tool is (morally) bad, but the distinction is important: the adequacy and efficiency of a given tool should not be discussed together with the morality of the purpose for what the tool is used for. In order to deceive or to tell the truth, we use the same tool; in order to occupy the territory of another country or to dissuade a given State leaders from taking action, we use the same tool, which is, in this case, the Armed Forces. We can thus discuss the lying and the aggression against neighbouring countries as morally bad actions, but we should appreciate the power of language if the lying worked and the addressee was deceived, as well as if the occupants' army succeeded in occupying the foreign neighbour. Those were good, efficient tools, adequate for the action they have been used for. Lying is bad from the moral point of view and so is occupying foreign countries. However, as we can see once again, this is another topic.

Sometimes, manipulation could be the best way out of a situation, while the democratic debate could be the worst option. Not everybody is always equipped to face the truth or to handle it. Children, teenagers, psychologically impaired individuals are the first categories of people that come to mind. Along with them, there can be almost anyone, depending on the context and situation: when emotions emerge, most of us would mishandle some shining truth and this could ruin important things, depending on the choices made. Manipulating people with age limitations or mental disabilities to the "right" path is all one could do, providing that one could say which the "right" path is! [4]. If it works, we will be in the presence of "good" manipulation (from the instrumental point of view). If the goal towards which manipulation is used is moral, then it could be also "good" from this angle. More than that, some goals could be context specific while they could change colors when looked at through different cultural lens. Thus, the "good" versus "bad" discussion about the appropriateness and efficiency of a manipulative activity seems to be of general value, while the morally "good" versus "bad" is culturally sensitive and subject to continuous evaluation.

Societies have tools to manipulate people at a large scale because they need to reproduce themselves in order to keep their coherence and consistency along time. There are ways of life, moors, rituals and traditions, social rules and *doxa* to pass on. Therefore, no society could ignore the need of influencing institutions that mark people's attitudes, behaviours and ideas. Societies are consistent with how people think and act within their territories, and this calls for communication. Through communication, and making use of mind formatting institutions (which is managing messages in order to make sense of given ideas), people come to communion of visions of life and of the world, and this is what makes them to be and to feel part of a community.

THE INSTITUTIONS

MIND FORMATTING INSTITUTIONS

The most important “mind formatting institutions” are the family, the school, the church, and the press. One of their most apparent roles in society is that of making individuals cope with the established order, and become “good citizens”, whatever this might be, according to the common sense. Reproaches like “why can’t you be like everybody else?”, exhortations like “take it from us!” or “follow good models in your life!”, in whatever case, are examples of communication in which not everybody is able to agree exactly on what is “good”, and even when agreeing, those people who say just that do not explain why those are the good ones. This is confusing to people who compare such examples with other more attractive models. All these formulas could be understood as “wooden language”, because they say nothing else, but the fact that one should fit in the community they live in, make choices (or just fake making choices) according to an already traced line they are not fully aware of. As stated before, it is all about standards and values. In addition, a surplus of information can be poured over the head of people, which can lead to changes in their behaviour. Indeed, if people keep talking about such phenomena, it has to be important... As a matter of fact, such surpluses of information are the rewards that societies offer to those who integrate perfectly, doing for instance what parents say, what teachers ask, what priests encourage. By providing the light of public appreciation, a good life, nice gifts and even making possible press recognition, children are mind formatted (Burke, 1969). Examples such as the apparent freedom of choice that parents give to their children or that teachers give to their students are nothing more than choices between what is socially acceptable, and what it is not. No third way is opened for creation or innovation, but solutions for being a “good boy or girl”. The choice is always dichotomous: it is just good or bad, moral or immoral, and the youngsters are urged to choose the first option.

The *family* is the first institution that individuals know. Since birth, people live in families, which are circles of protection and love where they get a feeling of belonging, of having rights, of continuity (indeed, such circles are felt as existing forever, even if the intensity of their presence varies along time). Restrained or large, the family is where children are educated (although in most cases, we could just say “formatted”), and learn how to act properly in different kinds of situations they might be confronted with during their lives. Culturally, “appropriate” approaches to what is accepted in terms of behaviour are different according to different group requirements: as families are set to prepare their offsprings to live in communities according to their cultures. In a TV interview made by the well known host of “Apostrophes”, Bernard Pivot, with the famous writer Marguerite Duras, the latter talked about parents manipulating their children by telling them just “Later! You will see this later”, instead of explaining them how the present might influence their future (Ina Talk Show, 2014). We can see in this anecdote an example of the deontic authority taking over the epistemic one, which is a sign of

manipulation. Do families build up in children a tendency to always really make free choices? Certainly not! Are they asking openly and explicitly their children to do whatever they should do? Unfortunately, only sometimes. At times, parents, grandparents, uncles and other family members just manipulate children in order to have them act in the most appropriate way, according to their specific community standards. Instead of being direct and encouraging, adults often use emotional pressure or fake reasoning (fallacies, as known in logic) to force them to act in accordance with what the surrounding society is expecting (or what they believe societies are expecting). Promises of what Father Christmas will put under the tree, mixed up with menaces of getting but few gifts from him if they are “bad” children, or descriptions of a gloomy future as rational consequence of bad behaviour, are different ways of manipulating children into making them choose what is considered to be the “right thing”. Is it good? Is it bad? With regards to the instrument itself, it is good if it works or it is bad if it does not. It certainly deprives children of free choice in their actions, but the aim is perceived to be valuable because, by doing so, they will be able to cope with what society might be expecting from them, and this is what most parents want for their children. So, aim-wise, it is good.

The *school* is another mind-formatting institution. Its influence overlaps with that of the family, and the two strengthen the cultural pressure for formatting children. Families prepare their kids to do well at school, and that has the role of ensuring child supervision during the first eight to eleven years of education (depending on the country). During the school years, teachers have plans and cultural perspectives that they should observe. Even open school systems are supposed to follow cultural constraints, according to what societies have regulated in terms of curriculum (*lato sensu*). If we think of the discipline that we came to call “History”, we have a good example of how culture immanently operates. It should be about the history of civilization. However, we all know that it is just a subjective presentation of it. In many countries, it is usual to manipulate kids in order to make them proud of a certain image of their nation and historic heroes (presented as possible models), to make them get a specific perception of the world (Foorman, 2007).

Take the example that the Portrait Gallery, in London, shows in their historical explanation of British national hero: Nelson. The story starts by telling that Nelson was a remarkable soldier who, coming from the warfront, got and lost a stellar recognition because of his divorce as a consequence of an adventure with lady Hamilton. Then, he goes to war again, dying like a great hero after winning the Trafalgar battle in 1805. His sacrifice is perceived as being comparable with Christ’s. However, unfortunately, after death, he loses once again his aura in 1814, when his letters to lady Hamilton were published. His prestigious name, thus, declines again. Around the mid 19th century, two historians decided to re-write the history of the great admiral with the aim of restoring his image. Curiously enough, that makes Nelson a hero again, a model for the new generations, a figure who could help in shaping the young minds in the spirit of patriotism. Nelson’s image will bear fruit during the First World War as well as during the

Second World War. In short: storytelling shaping History's perception; manipulation that worked well. The aim was perceived as morally good.

On the other banks of the British Channel, Cavanna, a French author of humorous writings, remarks in one of his books (Cavanna, 1981) that the English have the peculiar habit of naming streets, places, and squares by giving them names of defeats (like Waterloo), while the French act, supposedly, "normally", by naming their streets, places, and squares with the titles of victories (like Jena or Austerlitz). Although Waterloo could be seen as a victory for the British, Cavanna, as a French man, jokes with the fact that all is about perspective! Names, places and persons enter the class of worth remembering things because of the logic of naming streets and places. Living in France, one will always know that Jena is a name of something great, while someone living in London will always know that Nelson has to have been a hero of some kind. Nobody will ever have to tell that explicitly to students, but these ones will know it, based on the rule saying that you do not name streets by names of ordinary people or events. So, naming streets, and squares, and places makes us have a particular reading on the History and this is how we are different depending on the culture we come from, without even knowing that we indeed are. If we take another example, now from science, the logic is the same. Who was the first scientist to formulate the law of mass conservation? Was it Lomonosov or Lavoisier? If your school is in France, then it is obviously Lavoisier, while in Russia Lomonosov is the name you learn at school. The answer depends on the culture. Now, what are children singing in music classes and what kind of paintings are they drawing? To suppose what the answer is, one should know where the school is located.

The *church* is the other mind-formatting institution, but we will only refer to the Christian one. We feel more comfortable with it because we understand much better what it is and how it works. It is, obviously, an important institution in the life of the communities in which Christianity is the religion of the majority. The Christian Church is involved in the moral education of individuals and in the enhancement of communities' cohesion. Let's think of the types of discourses one is supposed to hear in the church. Aside from ritual discourse, as the Ten Commandments could be understood, the priests' speeches are usually manipulative. Choosing the right parabola to end the Sunday service is an art that priests have to perform in order to suggest solutions for the actual problems of their communities. Rhetoric or pragmatics? We believe that both play a role because, on the one hand, we have the text of the Bible and, on the other, there is the actual priest performance in front of the believers. Could we call it manipulation? Yes, of course! Is it bad? All we could comment on this should be about the efficiency of the storytelling in the church. If the sermon really serves as a solution for actual problems in the community, then it is good. The aim is moral, and, to make a joke about this, God wouldn't allow it otherwise...

The *press* happens to be part of our life, apparently more than other mind-formatting institutions (apart from families, of course). It is present everywhere, functions

everyday, all day long, for a long period of time of anybody's life. Its influence might be more pervasive than any of the institutions discussed above. The influence of the press overlaps that of families, schools, and even churches. However, it goes beyond those three institutions. One simply cannot stay anchored in the reality without information coming from the press. To start with, consider the mechanism that makes the press such a powerful institution. Defined in its strict essence, the press is made of people with an expertise in acquiring and editing news content using special equipment that multiply it exponentially and send it simultaneously to a lot of people, the public. The strength of the multiple media venues comes from the simultaneity of distribution, together with the awareness that members of the public have about the fact that they get the same content in the exact moment with a large number of other individuals, so that they will become aware of the same things at the same time. It is, indeed, a powerful institution, mainly because of the awareness of participating in the same events simultaneously.

To better understand this mind formatting institution, we should have a look over the hardships of the journalists' work. It is hard enough to try to be where the important things happen, to compare what you know with what you see in order to determine whether you are in the presence of news, and to mould, in the appropriate way, the news' content in order to pass it to the minds and souls of the people who happens to buy your journalistic product. However, the harder thing is to make choices while immersed in the infinite amount of information flowing unstopably from all over. Journalists act, according to some theories, as gate keepers serving the public interest (Paillet, 1974). Although journalists serve, ideally, the public interest, who can really define it at any moment? These professionals have to decide in a split of a second whether some information should be passed on over to the public or not. Sometimes they are right, sometimes they are not, and even that, that depends on the public. These are the risks of this profession. At any rate, the public is served with products coming from somebody else's choice. Is it manipulation? Sometimes, yes. It happens when journalists undertake the role of "guides" of public opinion, making choices that might be maculated by their decision in acting this or that way. Manipulation also happens when journalists comply with what they think to be their public's expectations. This can go even further when those professionals use "agenda setting" (McCombs & Shaw, 1972; 1993) and "framing" techniques (Schillinger, 1948). According to Schillinger (1948) framing consists of issues or topics that prime the public towards some perception of the reality [5]. If the journalists' general intent is to awake the members of a given community to some issue that the public tends to ignore, but having a real importance, then we can say that manipulation through the agenda setting technique (McCombs & Shaw, 1972; 1993) is addressed towards a good, moral aim. Otherwise, it is bad. However, in this case, the discussion should concern another matter: that of the journalists' action and efficiency. This might help in deciding whether manipulation was a good instrument or not. The moral problem lies in the distance between the journalists' and the public agendas. If the distance tends to zero, we may have manipulation, but the aim is perfectly moral. What we must discuss is the efficiency of the manipulating media discourse. It might be considered good manipulation if the intention behind the discourse

is fulfilled. Thus, it is all about the capacity to perform, not about the moral nature of the aim pursued in some manipulator's action.

In this paper, we look at some mind formatting institutions, techniques that they use, and purposes that they pursue (in a not so transparent way!). It can be said that all of the above are just normal, everyday situations and routine actions. In most situations, we have manipulation, meaning by that, the kind of influence the target is not aware of. We should also know that the public of any media product make themselves available for manipulation because of prejudices and stereotypes, which are our mode of thinking before thinking. "Tell the other exactly what he wants to hear" is the usual approach. In most situations, it is not the press setting traps for us, but it is us offering them the perfect prey for manipulative actions.

LANGUAGE: A HUMAN COGNITIVE AND AFFECTIVE "INSTITUTION"

Language is something that ordinary people do not pay attention to, as opposed to experts who do. Everybody uses language in daily communication and this makes us ignore its imperfections, its imprecisions, but also its beauty. We rely on language – whatever our mother tongue is – and we do not, usually, feel insecure. And yet, we should. According to Romanian professor Solomon Marcus, member of the Romanian Academy, there are so many imprecisions in the language that we'd better not be aware of [6]. Ambiguity, vagueness, randomness are only some of them, and they are everywhere. More importantly, sometimes they are found packed together, melted, making our communication even riskier. It is a blessing that we are, usually, not aware of all those risks.

Things get worse when we try to make translations, to find equivalent formulas in two or more different languages. It has been suggested (Wierzbicka, 2009; Goddard, 2011) that semantic description in universal semantic metadata of what seems to be equivalent words from two distinct languages shows dramatic differences between what is said by native speakers of one language and what is said by native speakers of another. A research that we undertook on the differences between words coming from the same Latin *ad casam* in Romanian and in French shows that the Romanian adverb *acasă* (the Romanian word for the English "home") is rich in meanings while the French *chez* is but a preposition showing a process of desemantization and grammaticalization that made it mean practically nothing at all by itself (Stoica, in press).

This discussion seems to bear no importance for a study about mind formatting institutions, but we are now living a wide and profound phenomenon, usually called "globalization", which means deterritorialization of information and massive displacements of populations (Bauman, 2004). All this leads us to try to understand each other not only at a very practical level (where we usually are, and have to exercise linguistic structures), but at more refined levels (where we usually go in order to really try to understand people from other cultures). Studies of anthro-linguistics (Kay & Kempton, 1984; Roberson, Davidoff, & Braisby, 1999) as well as of socio- (Wierzbicka,

2009; Gladkova, 2010) and ethno-linguistics (Wierzbicka, 2009; Gladkova, 2010) have showed that each language describes a particular cosmivision shared by members of a given community. The configuration and the functioning of each particular language present themselves as expressions of linguistic traditions that determine, even if partially, the organization of the relationships between humans and environment. More than that, language – and for instance any language – gives voice to mysterious meanings concerning things, people and gestures, unveiling subtleties from the world of symbols and rituals (Dumistrăcel, 2007).

Testimonials about emotions linked to the concept *acasă*, harvested by two of our former students (Mihaela Chirvase and Alexandra Popa, respectively from Italy and Spain), suggest that Romanians living abroad miss family and friends they have left behind, but also smells (like the specific smell of Christmas in Romanian homes), lights and shadows they were (and still are) familiar with. One of those interviewed, a poet, said that using *acasă* in his language (Romanian) makes him feel good anywhere as long as he uses his native word. Indeed, he uses it all the time, which make us believe that this is the poets' way (Stoica, in press).

French people living away from their country and, in some cases, for their lifetimes, do not seem, in a possible perception, to linger over, according to the testimonials that we collected in our research. They lack things from their birthplaces, such as some sort of cheese, wine, or even their famous *baguette*. They might lack the company of others for their well-known *apéro* at mid-afternoon. They just need company to shoot the breeze together, with no strings attached. There seems to be no history involved, no tomorrow too, and no special, deep emotions related to the company of others. Lacking of the concept *acasă* in their native language, French people seem to have no real object to refer to (although they might use instead the term *maison*), while Romanians, having it, can recreate whenever they need a reality they can name. The reality may change, but they know what the concept is all about. Thus, they will always have an *acasă*. The difference between French people and Romanians could be obviously explained in many ways. However, our research leads us to believe that the lack of a specific term for saying "home" in French comes as an explanation for their kind of distantiated way in referring to the homeland left behind. It is not about patriotism – which is a strong feeling among the French people – but about specific emotions individuals have when they are away from their homes for a long time. We also remarked that the French we interviewed did not have the habit of visiting their birthplaces in France, while the Romanians we talked to went to Romania to visit their families at least twice a year – for Christmas and Easter – with the goal of taking part in these religious rituals. As a curiosity, the Romanian national television presented recently an extensive report in which they interviewed a young couple of Romanians living in London, UK, who came back to their village in Northern Romania (the region of Maramureș) to get married. They told us that they needed to hear the exact formula from the Romanian Orthodox ritual in order to feel really married, the traditional process of

getting married “the Maramureş way”. Cost-wise, it was much more expensive than getting married at the City Hall in London, but it wouldn’t have been the real thing.

Each language contains specific terms for group-related rituals, and this is why a term like the Romanian *acasă* evokes more than a geographic place (which could be recreated or even changed). It evokes an abstract place where symbols and rituals make sense and have effects. It is all about the use of language, of the mother tongue. We don’t realize how different we are because of cultural belonging: our minds, being moulded by our language, configure us not only individually, but socially, as states Moscovici’s theory of social representations (1976). Although social representations are pervasive, cross-crossing national languages can become a problem in a globalized world, because equivalent words in some different languages prove to be not that equivalent in others. Language as a social institution – and different authors stressed the importance of communication (Abric, 1994; Grize, 1996; Jodelet, 1989; Moscovici, 1976) in shaping social representations – carries an important role in the mental formatting of any given society. The mother tongue carves our brain and shapes our vision of the world. Following the Whorf-Sapir hypothesis (Kay & Kempton, 1984; Roberson, Davidoff & Braisby, 1999), we should agree that each of us perceives the universe around by the bias of our mother tongue. This line of inquiry leads to the idea that there are as many worlds as many languages describing them. The issue here remains: confronting two or more descriptions are related to different social representations. Think of comparing the American English “up-town” versus “down-town” with the Romanian *periferie* versus *centru* (which only seem to be like the French *banlieue* versus *centre-ville*, because the first, derived from *ban*, *banal* –the territory around a city, of common usage, with no original features– had its meaning changed more than half a century ago to designate the posh part of a city, which usually looks better than down-town). The English expression refers to a vertical positioning, while the Romanian one evokes the actual horizontal territory as organized in concentric circles. The French expression did not keep the Greek root, meaning circumference, having its meaning turned into the administrative view of the city organization. One should admit that these different cultural standings are hard to compare, and even harder to explain. However, what is interesting in this social representation problem concerns what the Americans will think in terms of “up” versus “down”, while the Romanians will always have a flat image of something expanding from the centre to its peripheral zone (its circumference). Thinking in line with language and culture through communication makes people reason quite differently: one should prefer to go up than go far away from the centre. These are examples of how the language we grew up with might imprint at least part of our perception about the world we live in, making us more open to some ideas or proposals than to other ones. As stated before, it is all in the language.

New theoretical approaches, like Natural Semantic Metalanguage (Gladkova, 2010; Goddard, 2011; Wierzbicka, 2009), are interesting instruments for intercultural studies, providing contributions that social representation theorists might look at. As an example, we shall take a look on a study by Gladkova (2010), where a comparison

between an English term and its Russian equivalent points out at striking semantic differences between the two. While the Russian *gorditsja* (to feel pride) refers to a positive emotional experience arising due to the realization of the goodness of one's (or someone else's) action (which does not have to be outstandingly good, but it has to be something that the person wants to do well), the meaning of its English counterpart "to take pride in" is consistent with a cultural attitude of "being in control of one's life", which is specific to Anglo culture. In the terms of Goffman's psycho-sociology (1974), we have, in this example, an opposition between protecting the negative face and protecting the positive face. In Gladkova's words (2010), if the Russian *gorditsja* is to be used as a standard of emotional experience, then the English pride could be characterized as a "weak" version of *górdōst*, with a "reserved" way of its display and more "mundane" conditions required for its arousal [7].

ENDING REMARKS

All the examples chosen to discuss the role of language in shaping what we call here as "mind formatting institutions" lead to the fact that we live in a permanently and discursively negotiated world. Our individual and social representations of the world are built by linguistic activity through communicative discourse. Language can be seen as the most powerful human tool, as the primary "institution" that culturally format our minds. Because all human social institutions function upon a discursive basis, they all rely, consequently, on the use of language.

We are smoothly shaped by the society we live in, and there are institutions taking care of this. We chose to discuss examples related to the most common ones, highlighting some shared features, namely that of the possibility of acting through manipulation. We also tried to make the case that the most important and discrete is language, understood here as the mother tongue, the "mother of the institutions". It moulds the information we receive about the world we live in, although structuring the reality we have to deal with. More importantly, language shapes our way of thinking and interacting socially with the others, shapes social representations. The other institutions – family, church, school, press – were presented as stances that use language to manipulate. Manipulation is a key word for us because humans exercise communication by willing to format minds (or persuade others of the appropriateness of their messages), to influence the subconscious, and sometimes to create stereotypes and implement ideas. As we tried to argue, manipulation is not an ethical issue. It is not always morally bad and, in fact, it should not be judged in terms of ethics and morality. We argue here, following Borçun's ideas (2006) – that manipulation is just a tool that is simply amoral. It can be acceptable or not, efficient or not, like any other instrument. Starting from this idea, we had the intent to present mind formatting institutions as (generally) good from the moral point of view, as they work to reproduce societies and to ensure that the intercommunion that holds communities together could be seen as social representations.

NOTES

[1] The use of the French term “formatage mental” that we adopted here, instead of “mise en forme de la pensée”, est un anglicisme utilisé par François Deguilly (personal communication, July 13, 2004).

[2] An example for this kind of influence can be the phrase uttered by a character (embodied by Sir Anthony Hopkins) in the film *Shadowland* (directed by Richard Attenborough), on the matter of praying God. He says “I am not praying to change Him, I am praying to change me”.

[3] We could also discuss this question on another level, such as that of taking movie discourse itself as an instrument for manipulation. The discussion will remain the same.

[4] This is a tricky one, because no human being could ever say he/she really knows for sure what the right thing/path/direction is. Nevertheless, there are standards and values that each culture lives by and “right” could be defined with respect to those standards and values. Here, we try to point out the difference of knowledge of standards and values, which leads to differences between members of a given community as for knowing what is the right thing to do.

[5] Schillinger (1948) clarifies what “framing” means in Chapter 7, “Ratio and rationalization” of his book “The mathematical basis of the arts”: “Rational behavior – behavior according to a ratio. Rational composition – composition based on a ratio. Rational thinking – thinking in terms of ratios. When the ratio is established, involution (power-differentiation) takes its course. Cutting a portion of space by simple (monomial) or complex (polynomial) periodic motion establishes an area. Thus, enclosing an unbounded space in a rational boundary *ipso facto* introduces regulations that are the inherent laws within the boundary. The act of limiting converts potentiality into a tendency (intent).” (p. 193).

[6] Personal communication by Professor Solomon Marcus at “Alexandru A. I. Cuza University” at Iasi, Romania, during the “Congress of the Romanian Society of Semioticians”, October 2010.

[7] On this matter, see also other works by Goddard and Wierzbicka.

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TrajEthos, 4(1), 91-109, 2015.

Submitted: 12/04/15; Revised: 11/10/15; Published: 29/12/15.