

LINGUISTIC USES AND ABUSES OF DEFINITIONS AND VOCABULARY OF CONTEMPORARY WARFARE

Alessandro Vitale

University of Milan (Università degli Studi di Milano), Italy

alessandro.vitale@unimi.it

The paper presents an overview of the current uses of lexical units denoting contemporary warfare. The paper offers steps to be taken by scholars to provide rigorous definitions of the warfare vocabulary by way of reexamining the concepts and definitions normally used to talk about contemporary conflicts as well as advancing a reconstruction of a critical lexicon.

Key words: *new wars, definitions of war, violence spread, war and peace, civilian casualties, war of aggression, pragmatics of communication, linguistic acts.*

Despite appearances, war has been changing for at least fifty years. It changes its forms, its meaning, the technological modes of combat, the actors in the field, their military organization, the political-strategic objectives, the narratives about war, the forms of political-military mobilization, the forms of communication and information, those of financing, the relationship between society, economy and war, the very relationship between peace and war and between military and civilian dimensions. It is a change that implies the use of new definitions, often very difficult to find but of great importance for understanding and identifying the new forms of war without confusion.

The problem, however, is that this change also causes the opening of a very wide semantic space, into which distorted uses and abuses of the terminology used to define war creep in, functional to reinforce preconstituted theses, ideologies and legitimations of war activity and its old or new forms of violence. As Arthur Koestler also noted, “Wars rage on words; their space is semantic”. The control, the definition of the dominant and widespread war imaginary is also based on the elaboration of a predefined, artificial language functional to the logic of violence. Often words born with one meaning are reused or shaped in a totally opposite sense. Or we attribute to certain definitions of war, used inappropriately, a meaning they do not have: definitions that should be deconstructed in light of actual historical experience. Above all, we can witness a colonization of language that aims to domesticate, to normalize the monstrosity of war, to reduce its unacceptable features to forms already known, less tragic and assimilated by consciousness. Actually, we do not possess an adequate language to define contemporary war.

From 1945 to the present, there has been an inversely proportional relationship between classic interstate wars and wars that no longer met those standards: wars of

fragmentation, terrorism, civil wars, wars with transnational articulation with actors other than states involved. With the 1980s and then with the dissolution of the USSR, with the end of the opposition between eastern and western politico-military blocs and the bipolar world, there also emerged a "strategic bifurcation" that saw warfare shift from the interstate (classical, Westphalian) to the supranational and subnational level. Increasingly smaller interstate wars (after 1989 of the more than one hundred and fifty conflicts that broke out, only about ten were interstate wars), despite their similarity to those of the past, have changed profoundly and have been increasingly permeated by “irregular” elements, which has turned them into “hybrid” phenomena, due to the presence in the same conflict of ancient and classical elements, but also of many new ones.

Indeed, hypermodern elements have been joined by other very crude and primordial elements, of brute and unrestrained violence, of the imbarbarization of the states, that are able to radically change the objectives, strategies and instruments of warfare. Without detaching themselves completely from traditional forms of warfare, these conflicts have accumulated, one on top of the other (or one within the other) and inextricably, old elements on top of others of novelty and difficult to read, understand and define. Warfare has thus become an increasingly fuzzy and uncertain phenomenon. As a consequence, the lexicon that is called upon to define war is increasingly imprecise. War crises see a lack of boundaries of space and time, and this is reflected in the lexicon. Most aspects of contemporary warfare elude legal categories (e.g., Hamas or non-state actors who are at war). Even the belligerents are undefined groups that are intertwined with each other. The actors are increasingly diversified and numerous, often linked by networks rather than hierarchical relationships, they are state but also non-state, organized into paramilitary forces. The battlefield, the theatre of confrontation can be undefined, broad, multiple and variable. In addition, the lexicon is confused due to the increasing difficulty of distinguishing between war and peace, combatant and noncombatant, public and private, and this creates hybrid conceptual spaces that result in the very hybridization of the lexicon. For example, the absence of formal declarations of war at the beginning of the conflict or peacemaking that clearly determines its conclusion, forces the lexicon of war into a continuous race, which affects it profoundly. Moreover, war tends to extend without boundaries, even in what seems like a classic war between states. Urban spaces end up militarized. There is a global involvement of private spaces, less and less clearly distinguished from public ones, in a state of war that for this reason becomes permanent.

Emerging elements of profound transformation of warfare make it difficult to define contemporary warfare. These are the centrality of communication, the speed, the spectacularization of war, the increasingly dramatic involvement of civilians transformed into targets, the presence of irregular forces, the overlapping of tools, strategies and offensive forms belonging to different eras.

The use of snipers is often complemented by the use of long-range bombers. With the most advanced technologies for long-range combat are combined hybrid warfare, disinformation, political destabilization, the growing role of image, as well as sexual violence as a weapon, torture, the use of concentration camps, population deportations, ethnic cleansing, genocide, and hostage taking. The space of information and disinformation, the space of television and the virtual space of the global network, which help manipulate the reality of war by providing interested and misleading definitions of it, have become battlegrounds.

In fact, linguistics can offer valuable help in the search for more precise definitions that adhere to reality, while also facilitating the construction of a shared international legal framework (e.g., one that better defines the boundaries of aggression). The importance of a lexicon that adheres to the reality of war is clear. Old and new phenomena can be clearly identified and kept separate. Distinguishing after all is the basis of knowledge in the social and political sciences. It is then up to people to demand that for a given type of war, as it manifests itself in reality, the right word is used. Clearly identifying the role of aggressors, of those who act out of imperial ambitions, to subjugate a population or to eliminate it, to enrich themselves, to assert their superiority and hierarchies, using war to maintain and strengthen their power, means in fact also being able to define by their name the new wars as they manifest themselves in reality and by the true and concrete ends they want to achieve.

Often the definitions of “civil war”, internal or “regular” war between two states do not coincide with reality at all. They can in fact be used not only to simplify reality, as the mass media that intercept a large and diverse audience need to do, but also, in the worst case, to mask or remove a reality that may be totally different and much more uncomfortable or difficult to accept, because it blows up reassuring beliefs, habits in reading it, known patterns. Moreover, among the worst effects of a distorted and uncritical use of definitions of a war is the fact that words make it possible to avoid confronting unpleasant realities, unspeakable truths, and the denial described by Stanley Cohen, which consists in denying (to protect oneself from responsibility) the conditions of suffering and injustice suffered by the victims of

the conflict itself and especially those conditions that we help to aggravate by our actions or inaction.

Thus it is that while witnessing the suffering caused by far more complex forms of wartime violence, those who use unsuitable and unrealistic definitions and conceptual categories read that condition through the filter of a lexicon that is generally outdated and in any case unsuitable, but by now internalized, to the point of turning it into a condition resulting from the culpability of the victims. To the point that words make one blind and unable to recognize reality on the one hand, but also guilty on the other.

For example, defining a “war of aggression” (direct violent action not justified by obvious reasons of self-defense) as “civil war”, “defense war”, or simple war between two states can be very serious. In fact, with the definition disseminated and made accepted in public discourse one enters the realm of a linguistic act, of the pragmatics of communication, and forces thinking to follow an already traced path of misinformation and misidentification and misunderstanding of one type of war quite distinct from another, perhaps opposite in its deep and less visible connections.

Just as not to define “war of extermination” or “war of annihilation”, “war of deportation and depopulation” as a conflict that involves the deliberate elimination of a population, the systematic bombing of non-military infrastructure, phenomena of ethnic cleansing and deliberate depopulation, and more than 95 percent of the casualties among civilians, and to define it instead as a “war between two states”, is not only a mistake, but is to make use of an ideological tool to achieve a political result: a redefinition of power. When war becomes daily terrorism against the civilian population, widespread and molecular violence, an attempt to push the conflict to the extreme in order to intimidate and terrorize the opponent to force him to surrender or flee, one cannot speak of classic logic of war between states or civil war. War becomes full politics and strategy to eliminate a population or a community, clear or clean up a territory, with no longer a clear separation between peace and war.

Violence even becomes an end in itself and politics overflows from its rigidly state and territorial framing. This was already clearly seen in the case of the Yugoslav Wars of the early 1990s, when the bewildered and disorienting debate among journalists, academics and scholars-turned-opinion makers was reduced to the conflicting definitions of internal war (to the former Yugoslavia) or international conflict between states (the former Yugoslav republics) or between opposing ethnic groups, when these were conflicts with very different characteristics. The use of false definitions to identify war distorts the perception of the situation and can even

prevent us from thinking about it. A whole class of words can turn into tools of adulteration, manipulation, and regimentation of reality, which is thus rendered unrecognizable. They are also definitions, words and concepts that can be used as weapons or “cultural and ideological bullets”, fired to induce the public to believe in a reality that is very different from what actually manifests itself.

The definitions that are used for new conflicts can themselves become part of the violence employed. Indeed, they serve to exaggerate and mobilize emotions, redefine and radicalize affiliations, and exacerbate artificial us-them contrasts so as to gain political support. Incorrect or arbitrary definitions of a conflict serve to create an ideal narrative within which accountability can be distorted. Talking about hybrid, composite warfare and irregular conflicts can help to identify more appropriate definitions that understand reality.

Defining contemporary wars in a way that adheres to reality is therefore of utmost importance. Even when the reality is horrific. As Hannah Arendt explained, "Understanding does not mean explaining phenomena with general statements in which the impact of reality and experience is no longer felt. [...] To understand means to deal unscrupulously, carefully with reality, whatever it may be." This must be matched by an adjustment of the lexicon, beginning with the sciences of man, so that it reflects the reality of war in its contemporary transformations, its methods and objectives, including the most unbearable and violent ones. It also means preventing the erroneous and self-interested use of definitions, because the use of aged and inadequate words distorts reality, creates distorted imagery, consciously or unconsciously manipulates the picture of relations between ourselves and others, and does not allow for a clear picture of war. Moreover, it can lead to reducing, by justifying it, a bombing of civilians and hospitals to a means to achieve certain ends, deemed understandable or even accepted.

The task of scholars and researchers is to use their disciplines as toolboxes capable of providing rigorous definitions that adhere to reality. It is to reexamine the concepts and definitions we normally use to talk about contemporary conflicts, to advance with a reconstruction of a critical lexicon. It is also finally to prevent, with courage and generosity, the distorted and interested use of inadequate definitions by criticizing and denouncing the interested distortions.