

Tongues of Tyranny: Language, Ideology, and Power in *The Handmaid's Tale*

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Abstract: The relationship between language and power has emerged as a central topic of inquiry in contemporary discourse. Questions regarding the nature of language, its impact on power dynamics, and its role as a tool of communication have captivated scholars and thinkers alike. Michel Foucault posits language as a primary instrument of power, which has been instrumental in the introduction of individuals into society, the reinforcement of social hierarchies, and the dissemination of power's ideologies (Foucault 179). This paper elucidates upon the function language assumes—a pivotal role in shaping individual identities and perpetuating the power structures that govern society in Margaret Atwood's seminal work, *The Handmaid's Tale*.

Additionally, this paper explores how ideology stands as a cornerstone of governance for ruling authorities and dominant societal groups, serving as a mechanism to maintain their privileged positions while ensuring compliance from subordinate individuals. This ideological hegemony operates through various means, including Louis Althusser's concept of Ideological State Apparatuses (ISA) and Repressive State Apparatuses (RSA). These apparatuses, ranging from discourse to coercion, facilitate the indoctrination and control of the populace, moulding them to conform to prescribed norms and values.

The Handmaid's Tale delves deeply into the mechanisms of ideology, particularly within the Gileadian regime. At its core, the narrative interrogates the ways in which ruling powers impose their ideologies onto the oppressed, employing both force and discourse to shape their perceptions and actions. Through the lens of the protagonist's experiences, the novel unveils the insidious nature of ideological manipulation and its profound impact on marginalised communities. This paper brings to light Gilead's systemic ideological practices that enable them to maintain power and exercise control.

This paper endeavours to explore the intertwining themes of language and ideology within the context of the Gileadian regime portrayed in *The Handmaid's Tale*. By examining the ways in which language serves as a conduit for power and ideology, it seeks to shed light on the experiences of the oppressed and elucidate the mechanisms through which dominant forces exert control. Through a nuanced analysis of textual evidence and critical theory, this study aims to deepen our understanding of the complex power dynamics at play and their implications for those deemed the “other” within society.

Keywords: Handmaids, Power, Ideology, Language, Gilead, Systemic Oppression

Language, like the mouths
that hold and release
it, is wet & living, each
word is wrinkled
with age, swollen
with other words, with blood

— Margaret Atwood, “Two-Headed Poems”

Words That Wield: Investigating Language as Discourse and Its Power Dynamics

Language as discourse plays a pivotal role in shaping power dynamics within a regime in several ways. Regimes often manipulate language to control information and shape public opinion. Through propaganda, censorship, and selective language use, regimes can control the narrative, suppress dissent, and maintain power. They are pivotal in defining borders, boundaries and lines of control of all regimes. Additionally, language is used by regimes to legitimise their authority and policies. Regimes employ rhetoric that portrays their actions as necessary, just, and in the best interest of the

people. This legitimising discourse helps maintain support from the population and external actors. Moreover, language constructs and reinforces national, cultural, and ideological identities, which are crucial for the legitimacy and stability of a regime. Regimes may promote certain linguistic markers or narratives to strengthen national unity and loyalty to the state. Also, language can be used to exclude or marginalise certain groups within society. Regimes may marginalise minority languages or dialects, suppress the expression of dissenting views, or stigmatise particular linguistic communities as a means of consolidating power and control. Importantly, language is a tool for controlling the flow of information within society. Regimes may manipulate language to distort facts, spread disinformation, or suppress alternative perspectives, thereby consolidating their control over the public discourse and limiting opposition. Language reinforces the dominant ideology of a regime by prescribing acceptable ways of thinking, speaking, and behaving. Regimes may impose linguistic norms and ideologies through educational curricula, media regulations, and legal frameworks to ensure compliance with the ruling ideology.

Foucault, renowned for his groundbreaking exploration of the inseparable bond between discourse and power, presents a novel approach to understanding language and its functions. In *The Will to Truth*, Foucault posits language as “the means by which an individual is initiated into society” (179). However, individuals seldom enjoy unrestricted freedom of expression, as social, cultural, and familial constraints perpetually restrict their ability to articulate genuine thoughts and intentions. As Foucault asserts, the use of language is not arbitrary; rather, it operates within a carefully supervised framework. Despite the boundless nature of language, individuals must exercise caution in their speech, mindful of the consequences of their words.

Throughout Margaret Atwood’s *The Handmaid’s Tale*, the protagonist, June/Offred, grapples with the limitations of language in conveying her experiences and emotions. She navigates the intricate power dynamics inherent in language, particularly how the regime manipulates it to subjugate and oppress its citizens. June/Offred laments the loss of language as a tool for genuine communication and self-expression, highlighting the regime’s efforts to isolate and silence dissent.

The narrative tracks the trajectory of Offred, previously identified as June, who once led a conventional life in America until political upheavals thrust her, along with numerous female characters, into the oppressive regime of Gilead. Initially, the regime deploys language as a tool to indoctrinate individuals into its ideology while cultivating the illusion of freedom of choice. However, figures such as Serena Joy, initially aligned with the regime, eventually find themselves silenced and divested of agency; Serena Joy's orations revolved around the sanctity of the domestic sphere and advocated for women to remain within the confines of their homes. Notably, Serena Joy herself did not adhere to this principle; instead, she delivered speeches, casting her own failure to abide by societal norms as a sacrifice for the collective good (Atwood HT 55). However, she has ceased delivering speeches altogether. Her voice has been rendered mute. Although she remains secluded within her residence, it appears to be an uncomfortable environment for her. The irony is palpable; having been held accountable for her rhetoric, she is now presumably grappling with the consequences of her words (Atwood HT 56). Unable to articulate their emotions and suffering, they become victims of the regime's stifling control, mirroring the plight of other women in society.

According to Linda Thomas in her work *Language, Society, and Power*, language functions as a cognitive framework that significantly influences our thought processes, making it challenging to conceptualise ideas beyond its established boundaries (39). Consequently, language has the capacity to construct ideologies that shape individuals' cognitive landscapes, thereby restricting their ability to think beyond predetermined norms (39). This phenomenon underscores the pervasive influence of language as an agent of power relations, wherein everything a person learns, believes, and thinks is mediated by linguistic constructs. For instance, in Margaret Atwood's novel *The Handmaid's Tale*, the greetings exchanged among Handmaids serve as a reflection of the religious and hierarchical structure prevalent in the society of Gilead. The Handmaids have specific phrases they use when greeting each other, which are mandated by the regime. Some of the common greetings include:

1. “Blessed be the fruit”: This is a common greeting among the Handmaids, and the response is “May the Lord open.” It emphasises fertility and the importance of procreation in Gilead’s society.

2. “Under his eye”: This phrase is used as a reminder of constant surveillance and the presence of God or the regime’s authority watching over everyone’s actions. (Atwood, HT)

These greetings are not just polite exchanges but are deeply ingrained in the culture and serve as reminders of the Handmaids’ roles and the oppressive nature of the society in which they live. They reinforce the religious and patriarchal structure of Gilead while also functioning as a form of control and surveillance. They are stipulated systemic exchanges which are designed to enforce a particular ideology and belief. It is aimed to change the thoughts and feelings, the idea of duty and the shape of the dreams of all the handmaids since they impact the speaker emotionally and psychologically.

Society and its cultural constructs intricately shape the production and dissemination of discourse, ensnaring individuals within the intricate web of language since its inception. Despite affording them the means to articulate thoughts and ostensibly exercise freedom of speech, people remain cognisant of the constraints enveloping their verbal expressions, even in mundane interactions. *The Handmaid’s Tale* starkly portrays this reality, where characters, regardless of status or authority, find themselves shackled by the suffocating grip of Gilead’s power system. For example, the regime endeavours to stifle authentic emotions, compelling individuals like Serena Joy and the Commander to suppress genuine sentiments and confront their solitude and communication barriers.

Within the confines of their relationship, Fred and Serena Joy’s communication mirrors the broader dynamics of Gilead’s oppressive regime. Their exchanges adhere to formal and ritualistic conventions dictated by societal norms, fostering an environment devoid of emotional depth and intimacy. Gilead’s stranglehold on language limits the couple’s ability to engage in meaningful dialogue, relegating their interactions to superficial exchanges characterised by guardedness and manipulation.

Fred's position of authority exacerbates the power imbalance within their relationship, further impeding genuine communication. Despite Serena Joy's influential role in Gilead's inception, she finds herself ensnared in the same web of control she helped create, her voice muffled by the regime's dictates. Both Fred and Serena Joy resort to manipulative language to assert dominance and conceal their true intentions, eroding any semblance of intimacy and connection.

In this dystopian reality, the erosion of genuine communication and emotional expression underscores the insidious nature of Gilead's power structure. Language, once a tool for connection and understanding, becomes a weapon of coercion and control, leaving Fred and Serena Joy's relationship hollow and strained amidst the oppressive shadows of Gilead.

Mind-Boggling and Tongue-Tying Machinery of the Gileadian Regime: The Aunts

Discourse, as a product of language, defies notions of absolute autonomy, existing not as an autonomous structure but as a dynamic construct contingent upon temporal and spatial contexts (Fairclough vi). Social, cultural, political, and individual factors intricately shape discourse, imposing their respective limitations and constraints. Language, as the medium of discourse, remains inextricably linked to the structures of power, perpetually subject to acts of limitation, censorship, prohibition, and distortion.

Despite these constraints, discourse garners widespread admiration and veneration for its role in facilitating communication (Sheridan 126). However, beneath its surface allure lies a covert capability to impose prohibitions and limitations on individuals, often overlooked by the masses. In some instances, speakers may inadvertently echo the beliefs or opinions of others, blurring the lines between intentional representation and inadvertent parroting.

For example, the regime frequently quotes and distorts scripture to support its oppressive policies and practices. For example, biblical verses are twisted to justify the subjugation of women and the establishment of the Handmaid system, "And when Rachel saw that she bare Jacob no children, Rachel envied her sister; and said unto Jacob, Give me children, or else I die. And Jacob's anger was kindled against Rachel: and he said, Am I in God's stead, who hath withheld from thee the

fruit of the womb?” This is a biblical reference twisted to justify the Handmaid system, taken from Genesis 30:1-2. In *The Handmaid’s Tale*, there are instances where some Handmaids appear to internalise or at least partially accept the teachings and ideology propagated by the Aunts, who serve as enforcers and educators within the regime of Gilead. While the narrative doesn’t delve deeply into individual Handmaids’ beliefs, there are suggestions that some may come to accept or rationalise their roles within the society. One example is Janine, a Handmaid who exhibits a degree of acceptance and even enthusiasm for the teachings of the Aunts and the regime of Gilead. Despite her traumatic experiences and the brutality of the system, Janine often expresses fervent belief in the righteousness of Gilead’s principles, especially regarding the importance of bearing children and fulfilling her role as a Handmaid. We find her believing in the manipulated scriptures and their teachings.

Repetition and memorisation form the bedrock of Gilead’s ideological machinery. Aunts, sanctioned enforcers, indoctrinate Handmaids meticulously, cementing the regime’s ideology through relentless repetition. Deviating Handmaids face ostracisation and their identities desiccated, while conformity yields a sense of fulfilment within Gilead’s framework. Aunt Lydia’s repetitive teachings stress endurance’s purpose, albeit cautioning against inevitable failures amidst harsh conditions.

The repetition of religious greetings reinforces Gilead’s divine mandate, affirming its pervasive control. Phrases like “Blessed be the fruit” symbolise obedience to Gilead’s religious doctrine. In Gilead, freedom is redefined to align with the regime’s dictates, permeating societal consciousness through repetitive cues. These linguistic cues serve not only to bolster the regime’s authority but also to delineate individuals’ purpose and constraints within this oppressive society.

The Handmaid’s Tale serves as a poignant illustration of how ideology operates through discourse, wielding language as its most powerful instrument. Through its nuanced exploration of discourse and power dynamics, the novel prompts readers to scrutinise the pervasive influence of ideology within society and the subtle ways in which language can be utilised to perpetuate hegemonic agendas.

For instance, the regime in Gilead strategically employs language in propaganda and public announcements to assert control and manipulate public opinion. Through speeches and official statements, Gilead's leaders reinforce a narrative of moral righteousness and advocate for strict social order to maintain stability and security. Aunt Lydia's quote, "Better never means better for everyone... It always means worse, for some," underscores the regime's rhetoric of sacrificing individual freedoms for the collective good (Atwood HT 366).

Another example of ideological manipulation is evident in the Aunts' efforts to normalise women's invisibility in society. Aunt Lydia emphasises the importance of being "impenetrable," asserting that visibility invites vulnerability and exploitation. This indoctrination is so deeply ingrained that even Offred, who once enjoyed freedom and visibility, succumbs to the ideological discourse of Gilead and refrains from being photographed by tourists (Atwood HT 39).

Offred's response to the tourist group reflects her internalisation of Gilead's ideology. She anticipates the interpreter's explanation to the group, recognising that the act of being photographed without consent is perceived as a violation of women's customs in Gilead. Despite her prior freedom and visibility, Offred's adherence to Gilead's ideological doctrine illustrates the profound impact of discourse on individual consciousness and behaviour (Atwood, HT). Through these examples, *The Handmaid's Tale* highlights the power dynamics inherent in ideological discourse and underscores the significance of critically examining the ways in which language shapes societal norms and individual agency.

Language as Ideological Arsenal: Discursive Power Dynamics in *The Handmaid's Tale*

Margaret Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale* serves as a poignant reflection of Foucault's insights into the indignity of speaking for others and the imperative of allowing individuals to articulate their own experiences (Foucault 111-2). Within the narrative, language emerges as a primary tool for the imposition of ideology upon characters, with metalinguistic play critiquing institutional linguistic practices that promote ideological agendas (Howells 123).

Ideology and language are intricately interlinked and serve as manufacturers of power within societal structures. People often engage in linguistic interactions without fully recognising the influence of ideology that has become ingrained in their preferred modes of communication. A prime example of this phenomenon can be observed in the dystopian society of Gilead, where conventions and doctrines permeate individual minds, leading them to forget or deliberately overlook prior societal norms.

In the Red Center, the relationship between the Aunts and the Handmaids epitomises the embodiment of 'common sense' assumptions, reinforcing the notion of hierarchy as a natural and unquestionable process. The Aunts, entrusted with the responsibility to teach and enforce the established doctrine, wield significant authority over the Handmaids. They possess knowledge of salvation, holy life, and the prescribed roles for women within the system, which they impart linguistically to the Handmaids. Language plays a pivotal role in this dynamic, serving as the primary medium through which ideologies are transmitted and legitimised. Ideologies are deeply intertwined with language, as language usage constitutes the most common form of social behaviour. Through language, ideologies manifest and assert themselves, shaping perceptions, behaviours, and power dynamics within society.

The presence of language provides a fertile ground for ideologies to assert their influence, acting as a mechanism for legitimising existing social relations and power differentials. Consequently, language becomes a crucial tool in the perpetuation and consolidation of power structures within society, with ideologies serving as guiding principles that uphold and reinforce these structures. In essence, the interplay between ideology and language underscores their symbiotic relationship as manufacturers of power within societal frameworks. Language serves as the conduit through which ideologies are disseminated and internalised, ultimately shaping the distribution and exercise of power within society.

Althusser's concept of the unconsciousness of ideology underscores its insidious nature, with Aunt Lydia embodying the agent of ideology in *The Handmaid's Tale*. Discursive strategies

disseminate ideology, permeating the consciousness of subjects unconsciously. The dominant ideology of the ruling class operates subtly, concealing authority behind discourse and limiting linguistic freedom, as demonstrated through Offred's trepidation in daily discourse.

Fairclough's theories on discourse power and its origins address questions regarding linguistic authority and criteria. Althusser's notion of ideology constitutes the world of individual experience, assigning predetermined roles within society. Language serves as both a tool of oppression and resistance, reflecting the intricate interplay between discourse, power, and social constructs within Gilead's dystopian society.

The ideology operates subtly, concealing authority behind discourse, as its influence primarily targets the mind, its effects not readily visible in the physical realm. Thus, those addressed under its sway often believe they possess linguistic freedom. Handmaids, gripped by ideologies, fear deviating from the power's will. Even if Offred recognises the law's inequities, she dares not defy it. Wittig posits language's power to subordinate and exclude women, advocating for radical linguistic transformation (Butler 35). Offred's trepidation in daily discourse underscores language's potential costs, limiting her freedom of expression. If language indeed dictates "social stratification" (Jones 143), questions arise regarding who wields linguistic authority and by what criteria (Jones 147). Fairclough's theories on discourse power and its origins address this inquiry.

Throughout *The Handmaid's Tale*, language serves as both a tool of oppression and a means of resistance, reflecting the intricate interplay between discourse, power, and social constructs within Gilead's dystopian society. The interplay between discourse and power is multifaceted and dynamic, defying easy categorisation. According to Foucault, this relationship is neither predictable nor centralised; rather, it manifests in myriad instances where double meanings abound, resisting straightforward interpretation (Foucault 168). The discourse/power relationship exists as a fluid and ever-evolving entity, wherein both elements serve as both objects and instruments of each other, advancing their respective agendas.

What renders this relationship particularly intriguing is its inherent complexity and ambiguity. Despite attempts to decipher its intricacies, the discourse/power dynamic often eludes clear interpretation, shrouded in layers of meaning and nuance. Yet, efforts to unravel this intricate interplay remain essential for understanding the mechanisms through which power operates and exerts its influence over language and discourse.

Language emerges as the pivotal tool for challenging and deconstructing the coherence of social stigma in *The Handmaid's Tale*. Characters within the novel endeavour to harness the power of words in their quest to defy the prevailing ideology. Language, however, is inherently entangled within power structures and serves as a product of ideologies. It carries the weight of shaping thought frameworks and constraining linguistic expression within predetermined boundaries. While language manufactures and perpetuates ideology, it also harbours the potential for resistance and subversion.

The Illusion of Freedom

Language emerges as the locus of power, serving as a battleground for the enactment of objectives and the imposition of linguistic norms that often measure individuals. Through language, individuals articulate the effects of power and reference specific discourses that facilitate the implementation of the power system's policies (Sheridan 138). Language, in this context, extends and reinforces the effects of power, intertwining the two in a complex relationship where discourse both shapes and is shaped by power dynamics (Sheridan 138, 168). For example, Gilead censors language and controls communication channels to suppress dissent and enforce conformity. In the dystopian society depicted in Margaret Atwood's novel *The Handmaid's Tale*, books and various literary works are either prohibited or subjected to modifications to conform to the ideological framework of the regime. This censorship and manipulation of literature serve to constrain the diversity of perspectives and modes of expression. As articulated by Aunt Lydia within the narrative, the new regime advocates a distinct notion of freedom, characterised by "freedom from" rather than "freedom to" (Atwood HT). This explanation underscores the regime's strategy of curtailing individual liberties under the guise of promoting societal order and security.

In the society depicted in Margaret Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale*, Handmaids are compelled to project an air of unapproachability and are explicitly prohibited from engaging in verbal communication with men. Within Gilead's societal framework, women are expected to maintain a demeanour of speechlessness and silence, perceived as vulnerable to temptation and cautioned to exercise vigilance. Despite these regulations, Nick violates the established rule by initiating verbal interaction with Offred, prompting her to respond non-verbally to avoid violating societal norms: Upon Nick's initiation of conversation, Offred refrains from verbal response and instead nods in acknowledgement, adhering to the prohibition against verbal communication with men. Aunt Lydia's admonition regarding male attempts at communication serves as a reminder of the inherent weakness of human flesh, likening it to grass. She emphasises that such behaviour is beyond the control of men, as it is ingrained by divine design. However, Aunt Lydia reassures Offred of her distinctiveness, affirming her agency to establish and enforce boundaries in interactions with men. She assures Offred that her vigilance and adherence to societal expectations will be acknowledged and appreciated in due course (HT 55).

Aunt Lydia reinforces the ideology of female silence, attributing men's attempts at communication to inherent weakness. She reminds Offred of her supposed divine distinction, urging her to establish boundaries and adhere to societal expectations. The implication is clear: compliance will be rewarded.

Verbal discourse serves as a crucial mechanism for defining individual identities within the oppressive confines of Gilead. Ideological norms permeate every aspect of social interaction, with the Red Center and the Aunts dictating behavioural codes and shaping the roles of Handmaids. Power manifests through linguistic manipulation, as the handlers exploit language to instil self-doubt and erode personal beliefs.

In this environment, Handmaids become mere puppets, concealing their true selves or even losing sight of their reality altogether. Language, in conjunction with ideology, dictates behaviour and appearance, birthing a new, contrived self while obliterating the authenticity of the old. The

dominant ideology suppresses dissenting voices, casting them as heretical deviations. Offred's reflection underscores the swift and insidious nature of this transformation, where minds are easily swayed. In *The Handmaid's Tale*, the interplay of language and ideology fundamentally alters social dynamics, subjugating individuals and reshaping their identities in service of the regime's oppressive agenda.

The notion of freedom in *The Handmaid's Tale* is not inherent to individual agency but rather constructed and defined by language and ideology. Through repetition and indoctrination, individuals come to accept the definitions of freedom imposed upon them by the ruling regime. Althusser's perspective elucidates how ideology operates unconsciously to shape individuals' perceptions of freedom. The lived experience of freedom, as perceived by individuals, is intricately intertwined with ideology, blurring the line between consciousness and ideological influence.

Throughout the novel, Offred's reflections on choice and agency underscore the illusion of freedom within Gilead's totalitarian regime. Despite the appearance of choice, Offred recognises the predetermined paths dictated by societal norms and expectations. Whether it's the seemingly inconsequential decision of which route to take or the recognition of her body's subjugation to male whims, Offred confronts the constraints imposed upon her autonomy by the ruling class's ideology. The irony of freedom becomes apparent as Offred grapples with its limitations. Even on designated days of freedom, there are implicit boundaries and restrictions that constrain individual actions. Offred's analogy of a rat in a maze encapsulates the paradox of freedom within Gilead: the illusion of choice is maintained as long as individuals remain within the confines of the regime's oppressive structure.

In essence, *The Handmaid's Tale* highlights the intricate interplay between language, ideology, and the concept of freedom. Through repetition and indoctrination, individuals internalise the ideologies of the ruling class, blurring the line between agency and coercion. Offred's narrative serves as a poignant reminder of the fragility of freedom within oppressive systems and the pervasive influence of ideology on individual consciousness.

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