

Dr Stefan Sonderling  
Research Fellow  
Department of  
Communication Science,  
Unisa, Pretoria  
[sondes@unisa.ac.za](mailto:sondes@unisa.ac.za)

# POETRY IN THE ACT OF KILLING<sup>1</sup>: THE BLOODY ORIGIN OF LANGUAGE AND COMMUNICATION

## ABSTRACT

*There is a common belief that war and violence hinder communication, and conversely, communication has the power to end wars and conflicts. This article challenges such logic and argues that human identity, language, meaning and communication have their origin in war, death and the spiritualisation of killing on the battlefield. Indeed, the assumption that acts of killing and warfare are formative of becoming human underlies much of the world's cultures and the tradition of Western philosophical thought initiated by Heraclitus in ancient Greece. This article traces the way major Western social thinkers imagine war and killing as the foundation of poetic speech, and how face-to-face combat can be considered the primordial model for human dialogue, with death and killing the foundation for the construction of abstract concepts and meaning. The article also examines the way the ideas of war, killing and death are used in the broader discussion by Western social thinkers on the origin of language and meaning.*

**Keywords:** rhetoric; war; killing; death; social construction of meaning; communication as war by other means; Heraclitus; Hegel; Kant

DOI: <https://dx.doi.org/10.18820/24150525/Comm.v21.1>

ISSN 1023-0556 (Print)  
ISSN 2415-0525 (Online)

Communitas 2016 21: 1-15

© UV/UFS



## INTRODUCTION

The assumption that communication inherently contributes to peace dominates mass media and scholarly discourse. As a result, peace is idealised while war is condemned as senseless violence, and an inhuman and irrational disturbance of the presumed peaceful habitus of enlightened human beings. From this follows an axiomatic assumption that communication has the power to end war and restore humanity to its imagined pristine peaceful state of nature. Such assumptions are evident in the influential claim by Habermas (1981: 314) that “our first sentence expresses unequivocally the intention of universal and unconstrained consensus”. Habermas assumes that the aim of all communication is to reach consensus, and conversely, war and conflict are the result of the breakdown of communication. This implies a clear dichotomy: violence terminates communication because it reduces language to silence, and conversely, communication has the power to prevent violence because it transmits information (Dawes 2002: 2). Such beliefs grew stronger

as electronic communication technologies were expanding globally because it was assumed that they offered the ultimate means to end all wars. In the postmodern discursive “global village”, ideology has allegedly come to an end (Bell 1962) and the end of history has even been announced because the ideological conflict of the Cold War has ended with the fall of the Soviet Union (Fukuyama 1992). Perfect communication supposedly eliminated all ideological differences so there were no causes left for which to fight (Fukuyama 1992: 311).

Expressing confidence in such peaceful utopia, McLuhan (1969: 90) declared that new computer technology can translate incompatible languages and offer “a Pentecostal of universal understanding and unity”. But contrary to these expectations, more communication paradoxically intensified warfare and the myth of peace was shattered. Thus, Adams parodies McLuhan’s belief in communication as if it were a magical Babel fish: “If you stick a Babel fish in your ear you can instantly understand anything said to you in any form of language”, however “the poor Babel fish, by effectively removing all barriers to communication between races and cultures, has caused more and bloodier wars than anything else in the history of creation” (Adams 1979: 50).

The return of war puzzles social thinkers because it does not fit the predictions of mainstream social theories (Mouffe 1993: 1; Žižek 2002: 75). However, this is understood by scholars possessing knowledge of history because the return of war signifies that “the world has become normal again” (Kagan 2008: 3). Indeed, understanding war as a rational human activity has a long and ancient intellectual tradition in most cultures, and in Western thought it dates back to ancient Greece and was reflected in the texts of almost all major Western philosophers throughout history (Lomsky-Feder 2004: 83). Writing at the end of the 19th century, Nietzsche argues that “life is a consequence of war” and that “society itself is a means to war” (Nietzsche 1968: 33).

In the 21st century it becomes evident that war always was, and remains, the organising principle of the postmodern world and thus the existing civil peace within these societies is another form of fighting a civil war (Foucault 2003; Hardt & Negri 2006: 13, 334). Such conditions require a new and positive understanding of war and its relationship with communication. Such an understanding was already alluded to by the eminent 19th century’s philosopher of war, Carl von Clausewitz’s (1985: 402) speculation that war might be “merely another kind of writing and language for political thought”.

This article argues that war and its activity of killing and dying, which have been the common experience of humanity throughout history, are the foundations for the emergence of language, poetry and communication. The article reviews a number of mainly Western major social thinkers on the formative force of killing and warfare to show that from antiquity to the present, war has been, and still remains, the most popular theme to inspire poetry, literature and visual representations and communication in almost all known cultures.

## THE BLOODY BATTLEFIELD AS THE PLACE FOR THE EMERGENCE OF LANGUAGE AND COMMUNICATION

Ever since the ancient Greek philosopher Heraclitus proclaimed war as the father of all things, major Western social theorists have acknowledged war and conflict as primordial formative forces. Moreover, such assumptions were not limited to Western culture but are evident in almost all human cultures (Brosman 1992: 85). Human imagination and discourse can attest to the fact that “the battlefield is symbolic of the field of life, where every creature lives on the death of another” (Campbell 1993: 238). Heraclitus’s assertion that war is the father of all things gives birth to ancient Greek poetry and literary production: from Homer’s poetry in the *Iliad*, to the literary prose in the writing of historians such as Thucydides and Herodotus (Havelock 1972: 21; 1982: 304). Such genealogy inspired Nietzsche (2009: 90) to speculate that if “war is the father of all good things”, then it can also be assumed that “war is also the father of good prose”.

Historians contend that the link between poetic and literary communication and war is derived from the oral and agonistic character of ancient societies (Ong 1982: 43). The characteristic of social interaction in oral societies is a confrontational face-to-face encounter where antagonism is integral to the verbal interaction, as Ong (1982: 45) argues, “when all verbal communication must be by direct word of mouth” these are also “involved in the give-and-take dynamics” of everyday life and contain both attractions and antagonism. The physical and verbal interactions follow the same pattern as if both were exchanges of blows (Ong 1982: 68). In other words, verbal interaction is a form of verbal combat (or “flyting”) and real battles are co-mingled with verbal battles and duels can function as either preludes to battle or as substitutes to bloody contests (Pagliai 2009: 61; 2010: 87; Parks 1986; 1990; Ong 1982; 1989).

George Herbert Mead (1965) locates the original human speaking encounter – the dialogue – in the exchange of blows as in a boxing match. Dialogue, like hand-to-hand combat, is derived from a primordial “conversation of gestures” where each combatant responds and anticipates the opponent’s moves (Bushman 1998). Mead contends that the social antagonistic actions precede the deliberate communication through symbols (Mead 1965: 129). For Mead (in Meltzer, Petras & Reynolds 1980: 36), “the blow is the historical antecedent of the word” because human consciousness evolved from the violent exchange of blows; this implies an evolutionary process whereby the “mind arises through communication by conversation of gestures in a social process or context – not communication through mind”. Such a material evolutionary process was already advanced by Blaise Pascal (1623 – 1662), thus Althusser (1971: 168-169) contends that Pascal promoted the notion that body gestures construct ideas and beliefs in the human mind. Althusser argues that Pascal seems to suggest that religious ideas or beliefs develop directly from material physical practice: if an individual wants to acquire religious beliefs all that is required is to “kneel down, move your lips in prayer and you will believe”. Althusser’s reading of Pascal is inspired by Karl Marx’s materialist conception of human consciousness. Marx (1972: 119) rejects Hegel’s idealistic philosophy that assumed ideas originated in the rarefied world

of the spirit, and instead he argues that “life is not determined by consciousness, but consciousness by life” and thus language which is an embodiment of “practical consciousness” (Marx 1972: 122).

To support the argument outlined above the next section will trace how the ancient Greeks theorised the emergence of language and thought from the reality of bloody battles and how bodies and fighting action on the battlefield provided the primordial vocabulary for subsequent development of abstract concepts for poetry, literature, and art.

## WAR AS THE ORIGIN OF DISCOURSE

The origin of discourse can be linked to killing and death on the battlefields of the world’s ancient cultures (Brosman 1992: 85). For the West’s philosophical thought, ancient Greek battlefields provided the major inspiration. For the ancient Greeks, war, death and killing were integral aspects of life. In particular, the battle was the primary topic and inspiration for the Greek poets, writers, artists and philosophers. The ancient Greeks’ *Zeitgeist* understood war as a way of life (Havelock 1972), while many philosophers had personal experience of fighting on the battlefield (Hanson 2010: 45). This is attested to by Socrates who stood in the ranks of the Hoplites at Delium and the dramatist Aeschylus’ desire to be remembered not for his plays but for having fought at Marathon (Lynn 2004: 27). The philosophers, like all war veterans throughout history, “return to their experience in combat to clarify or broaden their thought on whatever subject they were discussing” (Hanson 2000: 45). For the Greeks, war was “the master text” that defined their humanity and identity (Coker 2002: 37). War provided the language and conceptual framework for understanding the world: “War was good to think with in the ancient world. ... Greeks and Romans frequently used ideas connected to war to understand the world and their place in it. War was used to structure their thought on other topics, such as culture, gender and the individual” (Sidebottom 2004: 16).

Homer’s detailed description of killing delighted readers throughout the ages (Bryant 1996; King 1991; Manguel 2007; Seaton 2005; Vermeule 1981: 97). Xenophanes credits Homer’s epic poem as the source of human thought, because “All men’s thoughts have been shaped by Homer from the beginning” (Hawkes 1972: 148). Homer’s *Iliad* presented the warrior as the ideal model of a human being and inspired philosophers and warriors for the past three millennia (King 1991: xi; Lynn 2004: 26; Manguel 2007: 2). The enduring popularity of the *Iliad* is derived from the persona of Achilles who could be “fruitfully manipulated for poetic, political, and philosophical ends” (King 1991: 219). “The *Iliad*’s military hero is used to make a profound statement about the human condition. Because Achilles is not only superlative in prowess and physical beauty but also superlatively complex – possessing skills of a healer, the uncompromising principles of an idealist, the self-knowledge of a philosopher, the artistry of a poet – readers are emotionally engaged with him as a complete human being” (King 1991: 220).

Death becomes infused with meaning because death in battle is a valuable contribution to the security and hence the continuous existence of the community. Death in the service of the community is an honourable and meaningful death and becomes a popular theme in literature and art (Vermeule 1981: 84). The warrior's acts of killing and his own heroic death are meaningful because they are interpreted as good acts of killing enemy combatants, as well as good deaths when defending the community, and in retrospect through repeated narration become aesthetically beautiful deaths to commemorate in poetry, prose and represented by visual art. Xenophon presents the good death as achieved through valorous fulfilment of duty and friendship that lasted for eternity: "corpses of both friend and enemy were lying with each other, shields smashed, spears snapped, swords drawn from their scabbards ... some fixed in their bodies, others still in the hands of the dead" (Xenophon, in Hanson 2000: 198). The sight of the dead warriors lying on the battlefield was familiar to many ancient Greeks. It was a popular practice to view the dead bodies after the battle ended. Large groups of curious spectators took sight-seeing tours of the undisturbed aftermath of the battle. It was also the practice of the victorious military commander to inspect the dead on the battlefield while the carnage was recorded by painters and inscribed in noble words by poets (Hanson 2000: 202-203).

The way a warrior killed his enemy defined his worth. Homer describes the successful fighter as gracefully killing the enemy in a quick and easy movement thus demonstrating skill and competence, while the second-rank fighter was cumbersome and his acts of slaying are brutal and grisly (Fenik 1968: 15). In the *Iliad*, killing becomes poetry as is evident from the exchange of words between warriors praising each other's courage in combat (Tatum 2003: 118). In the words of Tatum (2003:118-119), "Killing one's enemies can be carried out with as much craft and studied variation as any other art", and in a war poem the "poet's song and warrior's song blend into single melody" that "turns killing itself into poetry".

For Homer a whole aesthetics of the battle satisfies the curiosity of the ancient audiences. The detailed descriptions of giving and receiving blows, and the tit-for-tat reciprocal action resembles a dialogue of gestures with their corresponding rhyming words. In the "prestigious mode of combat" represented by the "face-to-face" situation the blows administered by weapons are intermingled with exchanges of verbal insults and praises. All this allows for a personal involvement of the reader who acknowledges the bravery and humanity of the combatants (Tatum 2003: 125). Hence, the pleasure of reading such early war literature is derived from satisfying the public's curiosity about war's mysteries. Moreover, for readers eagerly awaiting the outbreak of new wars, such literature provides a vicarious experience of what they can anticipate on the battlefield (Tatum 2003: 126-127). Thus, war is an incitement for speaking on various levels: the oral first-hand account, the narrated written account, the reception by an uninvolved reader and, by implication, further communication as the text is read by many, is publicly commented on becomes a prophetic prediction of events to come. Commenting on ancient Greek texts, Foucault (1988: 53) suggests that "it is quite likely, as Homer has said, that the gods send disasters to men so they can tell of them". Historian Victor Davis Hanson (2004: 15) notes that "plays, poems, and novels

are written because of a day's fighting", while art is commissioned and philosophy is born, or as a literary scholar speculates: "without war, there could be no hero, no history, no song, no jongleur, and no audience" (Vance 1980: 386).

The ancient warrior and the ancient poet share a unity of purpose: the one who fights and the one who narrates want to kill their enemies – whether by swords or by words – and to immortalise in language the killing of enemies and the death of brave warriors. "The goal of a good epic poet, in a battle song, is to kill people with picturesque detail, power and high spirit ... The *Iliad* begins with corpses burning on an alien plain and ends with a gallant corpse burning in prelude to the city's burning. The verses are studded with corpses in between, pierced and collapsing in a panorama of pictorial conventions, and gestures of ferocity held in check by formula and rhetoric which, as they killed, still invoked a more general life cycle through images of animals, planted fields and wild forests, storms and seas (Vermeule 1981: 94).

War is central in the transition from Homer's epic poetry to the prose narrative of Herodotus and Thucydides. While Homer's *Iliad* sings praise for fighting through which men win glory, Herodotus's prose records the sequence of reciprocal exchanges of gifts and injuries (Dawson 1996: 53, 74). Indeed, since antiquity war provides exemplary tactics for public speaking and debates; this is so because public arguments are structured as combats or wrestling matches and it is reasoned that a person could learn to speak and argue in public in the same manner as one learns to wrestle. The close affinity between speech and fighting is evident from the fact that both were learnt in the gymnasium (Hawhee 2002a; 2002b; 2005). The aim of public argumentations, like the aim of battle, is to win, but winning is not always guaranteed *a priori* but depends on an element of chance. To improve the likelihood of winning the ancient *word-warrior* – the philosopher or sophist – had to memorise a repertoire from Homer's panoply of battle scenes and used an appropriate example when an appropriate occasion arrived. This exposed the limitation of the rhetorical art because it shows that teachers of rhetoric "taught arguments" but "not how to argue" as they did not teach "a general strategy" (Ryle 1966: 200).

Strategy for winning argumentative battles was however developed by the warrior-philosopher Socrates who was able to identify the abstract principles underlying the "strategy and tactics" of battle, and to apply them to verbal arts with the result that "the combats of Homeric heroes found themselves being translated into battles between concepts, categories, and principles" (Havelock 1982: 304). Indeed, Socrates draws on his own battle experience as well as on the general agonistic *Zeitgeist* of the ancient Greek world. Perceptively Nietzsche (1978: 32) notes that Socrates "introduced a variation into the wrestling-matches" of rhetoric by asking substantial questions which disturbed the "agonal instinct of the Hellenes", which was characterised by its dazzling display of superficiality without much depth. It was Aristotle who finally provided a complete guide for verbal warfare. Linking war and rhetorical action, Ryle (1966: 18) argues that "Aristotle develops the methodology of the rule-governed battles of wits of which Plato's *elenctic* (or Socratic) dialogues gives us dramatised specimens", which has its analogy in famous military strategist in which "Aristotle is the Clausewitz to

Plato's Napoleon". Later generations of Western philosophers continuously turned to the ancient Greek scholars for inspiration.

## TRACING THE MARKS OF BATTLE IN THE TEXTS OF WESTERN PHILOSOPHY

The insights developed by the ancient Greeks that the structure of battle is reflected in human ways of thinking was elaborated upon by later scholars who proposed that the individual's process of reasoning is modelled on, and is an internalisation of, the public procedures of adversarial debates conducted in the ancient war councils (Hampshire 2000: 7-9; Hampshire 2002: 637-638). Thus, the habit of thinking is a product of social interaction whereby physical gestures and "social acts precede the symbol proper and deliberate communication" (Mead 1965: 129). All basic concepts are arguably directly related to strategy and tactics of living in a world of struggles. Indeed, the linguist George Lakoff and philosopher Mark Johnson (Lakoff & Johnson 1980) are able to demonstrate that most of our metaphors we use to describe reality are derived from the experience of war and fighting; thus the human ways of speaking, thinking, and acting are all structured like warfare. They conclude that describing the conduct of human argumentation as war is not merely a metaphorical description of discourse, but is the natural way people talk and argue in Western societies (Lakoff & Johnson 1980: 5). Thus if we argue as if we were fighting the converse is also true: "Physical conflict is itself already rhetorical, already a kind of symbolic action, already understood in terms of argument" (Crosswhite 1996: 128).

For the ancient Greeks, war was a constant reality and similarly throughout human history war was always the context against which everyday life was experienced (Cuomo 1996: 42; Favret 2005). Margaret Mead (1963) summarises this aptly: "Warfare is here, as part of our thought; the deeds of warriors are immortalised in the words of our poets; the toys of our children are modeled upon the weapons of the soldier; the frame of reference within which our statesmen and our diplomats' work always contain war" (Mead 1963: 132). The centrality of war in human life means that it left its traces in language and the discourse of scholars. Clausewitz (1985: 402) identifies a direct link between war and communication and proposes that war may be "merely another kind of writing and language for political thought". Nietzsche (2004) sees remnants of battle manifest in human speech where "one often hears an echo of the times when they were better skilled in arms" and "they handle assertions as poised archers their weapons" and one "hears the whir and clatter of blades" when "an assertion thunders down like heavy cudgel" (Nietzsche 2004: 183).

The use of military analogy underlies Immanuel Kant's (1798/1978: 92) philosophy as he locates the process of human understanding, judgment and reasoning in the sphere of military organisation that was the predominant exemplary institution of social life. Kant proposed (*ibid.*) that human reasoning evolved from the demands of military hierarchy: "The domestic or civil servant under orders needs only to have understanding. The officer, to whom only a general rule is prescribed, and who is then left on his own, needs judgment to decide for himself what should be done in a given

case. The general, who must consider potential future cases and who must think out rules on his own, must have reason.” Development of thought is motivated by demands of military leadership, as Kant notes: “Subordinates must not try to guide themselves by pedantic reasoning because the principle which should be employed must often be concealed from them, or at least remain unknown to them. But the general or commanding officer must have reason, because instruction cannot be given him for every case that might arise” (Kant 1789/1978: 94). Hence, for Kant epistemology has the form of the military chain of command, and the modern human subject is a soldier who learnt to think on his own, while the history of reason is the history of war (Kittler, in Winthrop-Young 2011: 136).

Hegel (1841/1910: 277), following on his predecessor Kant’s military analogy, sees war as the origin of human spirituality and in his philosophy locates human discourse in the sphere of warfare. For Hegel (*ibid.*) “war is the spirit and form” that provides the foundation on “which self-consciousness ... and every kind of existence is manifestly confirmed and realised”. Hegel affirms the military inspiration on his philosophy when he writes on October 13, 1806 he had seen Napoleon riding past on horseback and had immediately realised that he is observing “the world’s soul on horseback” (Hook 1962: 60). For Hegel, it was as if Napoleon – the great warrior – was the paradigmatic model for human spirituality, and indeed it may be suggestive that a century later another philosopher, Ludwig Wittgenstein (1988: 178) speculates that “the human body” provides “the best picture of the human soul”. For Hegel, history is a long discussion between men that is carried “with clubs and swords or cannon on the one hand, and with sickles and hammers or machines on the other” and inspires the verbal arguments of philosophy (Kojève 1980: 185). Hence, according to Kojève’s (*ibid.*) interpretation of Hegel, the human being’s very sense of self develops in this primordial battle to the death at the beginning of history. He envisages a primordial battle that establishes a social hierarchy of master and slave that throughout history is challenged and contested in a dialectical interaction whereby the one demands to be recognised as master by the other. This primordial violence is understood as being the origin of human consciousness, self-consciousness and identity. At first, consciousness arises from the fight itself and from the act of killing the opponent, because “without this fight to the death for pure prestige, there would never have been human beings on earth”; this is so because by placing their lives in danger, they prove that they are indifferent to their own animal survival and demonstrate they are worth more than animals (Kojève 1980: 11–12). However, killing the adversary does not yet produce a complete human identity because it constructs *consciousness* but not yet *self-consciousness* that is also required to complete the process. Self-consciousness is conferred by an act of mutual recognition from another living human being against whom one fights and defeats him. In turn, the defeated adversary does not lose his honour or fighting spirit because he knows that his defiance perpetuates the dialectical contest of submission and domination in which the positions of winner or loser are interchangeable.

Based on the central importance of acts of fighting and killing, Hegel goes on to argue that if thinking develops in battle, then it is reasonable to suggest that the formation of

the concepts used for thinking can be considered as an equivalent to killing or murder. This is so because in order to become an abstract concept it must detach itself from the particular living entity. As Kojève (1980: 140) explains:

For example, as long as the Meaning (or Essence) 'dog' is embodied in a sensible entity, this Meaning (Essence) lives: it is the real dog, the living dog which runs, drinks, and eats. But when the Meaning (Essence) 'dog' passes into the word 'dog' – that is, becomes abstract Concept which is different from the sensible reality that it reveals by its Meaning – the Meaning (Essence) dies: the word 'dog' does not run, drink, and eat; in it the Meaning (Essence) ceases to live – that is, it dies. And that is why the conceptual understanding of empirical reality is equivalent to a murder.

In other words, in order to think one needs to transcend the immediate material situation or reality by the use of abstract concepts that can be applied to other situations; in such a process the physical objects loses its physical substance as it is transformed into a metaphysical object. Indeed, what Hegel describes is a semiotic process as elaborated at the beginning of the 20th century by the Swiss linguist Ferdinand de Saussure (1857 – 1913) to explain how a sign used for communication consists of a physical and perceptible element he named “signifier” and its associated “signified”, which is the associated publicly known meaning (denotation) or more individual meaning (connotation) ascribed to it by a social group. Inspired by Hegel's idea of the transition from concrete objects to abstract concepts, Foucault argues that while an event such as inflicting a wound, gaining a victory or accepting defeat in battle, or death “is always an effect produced entirely by bodies colliding, mingling, or separating”; nevertheless, it can be understood by the human mind when it becomes incorporeal (Foucault 1988: 172-173). Foucault (1988) concludes that in discourse, “Death supplies the best example, being both the event of events and meaning in its purest state. Its domain is anonymous flow of speech; it is that of which we speak as always past or about to happen and yet it occurs at the extreme point of singularity” (Foucault 1988: 174). Foucault (1988: 173-174) explains this transformation of a singular event to a level of abstraction used in speech by providing another example:

'Marc Antony is dead' designates a state of things; expresses my opinion or belief; signifies an affirmation; and, in addition, has a meaning: 'dying'. An intangible meaning with one side turned toward things because 'dying' is something that occurs, as an event, to Antony, and the other toward the proposition because 'dying' is what is said about Antony in the statement. To die: a dimension of the proposition; an incorporeal effect produced by a sword; a meaning and an event; a point without thickness or substance of which someone speaks and which roams the surface of things.

Foucault (1989) goes on to document how the will to power and death were central to the birth of modern medical knowledge. In his study of the emergence of the clinic, Foucault (1989) shows that until the 19th century disease was considered as a symptom and one could only offer a blind guess as to its causes. A change occurred, however, when by cutting open a human corpse, the invisible internal organs were made visible, as a 19th century doctor metaphorically explains: “Open up a few corpses: you will dissipate at once the darkness that observation alone could not dissipate” (Foucault 1989: 146). Foucault comments that death thus became the key to understanding life, as if the “living night is dissipated in the brightness of death” (*ibid.*).

If the construction of concepts has such a bloody origin, it should be no surprise that affixing meaning to such concept is equally the result of violence and display of power.

## THE VIOLENCE BEHIND THE SOCIAL CONSTRUCTION OF MEANING

The violent play of power is central to conferral of meaning and it can be considered as the pre-theoretical knowledge and the foundations for meaning (Berger & Luckmann 1979: 83–84). Berger and Luckmann (1979) argue that the vocal signs are refined into words and become associated with meaning thus can be used to signify basic physical experiences. This is a process of *spiritualisation of violence*: the original violent physical act, such as beating someone with a clenched fist, elicits a submissive response, and, as the victim progressively becomes familiar with the meaning of the violence, only the sight of the clenched fist is enough to elicit the appropriate response (Berger & Luckmann 1979: 54-55). In other words, the reality of the sign becomes a symbolic reality representing or standing for real actions (Berger & Luckmann 1979: 70-71, 77). This process, known as the “social definition of reality”, entails the action of prominent and powerful social agents ascribing meaning to the physical and social worlds. In other words, to a large extent the social definition of reality implies that the social or physical *reality* is what people decide what it is supposed to signify. Ultimately, it is the signification or the meaning conferred on reality by the dominant social groups that is the one that will prevail and spread within a society. The definition of reality is thus not a peaceful process because it meets with resistance and the definers will use forms of persuasion, which include “getting the authorities to employ armed might to enforce one argument against its competitors” or they may even physically liquidate the opposition (Berger & Luckmann 1979: 139). Meaning is not decided by rational arguments but “on the less rarefied level of military might” and the “historical outcome of each such clash is determined by those who wielded the better weapons rather than by those who had the better arguments”. Berger and Luckmann (1979: 126-127) conclude that the signification or meaning that “will be made to stick” is determined by the group that “has the bigger stick” because it has the better chance to impose its definition of reality. The possession of social power explains, as Berger cynically notes, why “many social situations are effectively controlled by the definitions of imbeciles” (Berger 1980: 101). Nietzsche aptly summarises this by saying that “the lordly right of bestowing names (or meaning) is such that one would almost be justified in seeing the origin of language itself as an expression of the rulers’ power. They say ‘This is that or that’; they seal off each thing and action with a sound and thereby take symbolic possession of it” (Nietzsche 1956: 160).

A similar point is playfully made by the character of Humpty Dumpty, saying that when he uses a word, “it means just what I choose it to mean – neither more nor less” and then explains to Alice that this is so because he is the master and has power to impose such meaning (Carroll 1985: 269). Similarly, research by Bourdieu (1977: 25) confirms that “the meaning of a linguistic element depends at least as much on extra-linguistic as on linguistic factors”. Ultimately, the social mode of thought and the individual’s thought are not entirely uniform or static but are shaped by historical conflicts. This dynamic process whereby meaning is in a flux mirrors social existence where people

living in groups interact with and against one another, while their respective groups struggle and each attempts to “demolish the basis of its opponent’s social and intellectual existence” (Mannheim 1979: 34).

The philosopher Martin Heidegger speculates that human life is a kind of war (*polemos*) because human existence is dependent on interpretations of the world, and by their very nature, all interpretations are polemical and conflictual. As he puts it: “Dasein is polemos because Dasein’s existence is hermeneutical, and all interpretation is polemical” (Heidegger, in Fried 2000: 52). The reason that interpretations are always in conflict is that different people offer opposing interpretations of the same phenomena (Fried 2000: 52; Curtis 2006: 15). Moreover, if life is a battle, then human thought is involved in such battle, and by implication, in order to survive the human being “demands a philosophising that knows how to do battle” (Caputo, in Curtis 2006: 13). Consequently, knowledge always contributes to the ability of strategists and fighters to increase power and success in war, and in any other form of competing interests. On a wide historical scale such battles continue in the social and cultural spheres. For example, Edward Said (1994) in his study of the relationship between culture and imperial conquests argues that culture is a sort of a war theatre “where various political and ideological causes engage one another” entailing a conflict over who has the “power to narrate, or to block other narratives from” telling their stories and communicating their meanings of the world (Said 1994: xiii-xiv).

## CONCLUSION

This article documented the views of a significant number of social thinkers supporting the argument that language, poetry and communication are intimately linked to war, and that killing and spilling of blood are the conditions for their emergence. It should thus be no surprise that communication about war in the modern and postmodern mass media has consistently attracted large audiences and war can be considered as an indicator of the health of the media, as was documented in a study by Hallin and Gitlin (1993). Moreover, in the 21st century, war is “becoming a *permanent social relation*” and can be considered as the “matrix” or model to describe social organisations and the relations of power in the globalised world (Hardt & Negri 2006: 12-13). Thus Hallin (2008: 1) predicts that because “we are going to be in perpetual war for a long time” it should be obvious that our culture is a culture of war, and we must “understand war in order to understand our culture”.

Implied in Hallin’s statement is that culture is a form of communication, and therefore, an understanding of war is also essential for an understanding of communication. This is to reaffirm that from antiquity war’s “ability to entertain, to inspire, and to fascinate has never been in doubt” (Van Creveld 1991: 226). The significance of war is constantly re-enacted on the world’s theatres of war and in our daily speech, poetry, literature and the arts. Beginning in the ancient world of Homer, poets, writers, philosophers and artists transformed war and battle into an aesthetic experience that confers immortality on mortal human beings.

## ENDNOTES

<sup>1</sup> The title is inspired by a chapter title in James Tatum's book *The Mourner's Song* (Tatum 2003).

<sup>2</sup> I express my gratitude to Prof. DFM Strauss for invaluable comments while reviewing the text.

## REFERENCES

- Adams, D. 1979. *The hitch-hiker's guide to the galaxy*. London: Pan Books.
- Althusser, L. 1971. *Lenin and philosophy*. New York: Monthly Review Press.
- Bell, D. 1962. *The end of ideology: On the exhaustion of political ideas in the fifties*. New York: Free Press.
- Berger, P.L. 1980. *Invitation to sociology: A humanistic perspective*. Harmondsworth: Penguin.
- Berger, P.L. & Luckmann, T. 1979. *The social construction of reality: A treatise in the sociology of knowledge*. Harmondsworth: Penguin.
- Bourdieu, P. 1977. *Outline of a theory of practice*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1017/CBO9780511812507>
- Brosman, C.S. 1992. The function of war in literature. *South Central Review* 9(1): 85-98. <http://dx.doi.org/10.2307/3189388>
- Bryant, J.M. 1996. *Moral codes and social structure in ancient Greece: A sociology of Greek ethics from Homer to the Epicureans and Stoics*. Albany: State University of New York Press.
- Bushman, D. 1998. A conversation of gestures: George Herbert Mead's pragmatic theory of language. *Rhetoric Review* 16(2): 253-267. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/07350199809389095>
- Campbell, J. 1993. *The hero with a thousand faces*. London: Fontana.
- Carroll, L. 1985. *The annotated Alice*. Harmondsworth: Penguin.
- Clausewitz, C von. 1985. *On war*. Harmondsworth: Penguin.
- Coker, C. 2002. *Waging war without warriors? The changing culture of military conflict*. Boulder, CO: Lynn Rienner.
- Crosswhite, J. 1996. *The rhetoric of reason: Writing and the attraction of argument*. Madison, WI: University of Wisconsin Press.
- Cuomo, C.J. 1996. War is not just an event: Reflections on the significance of everyday violence. *Hypatia* 11(4): 30-45. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1111/j.1527-2001.1996.tb01033.x>
- Curtis, N. 2006. *War and social theory: World, value and identity*. New York: Palgrave. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1057/9780230501973>
- Dawes, J. 2002. *The language of war*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press. <http://dx.doi.org/10.4159/9780674030268>
- Dawson, D. 1996. *The origin of Western warfare: Militarism and morality in the ancient world*. Boulder, CO: Westview Press.
- Favret, M.A. 2005. Everyday war. *English Literary History* 72(3): 605-633. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1353/elh.2005.0023>

Poetry in the act of killing: The bloody origin of language and communication

- Fenik, B. 1968. *Typical battle scenes in the Iliad: Studies in the narrative techniques of Homeric battle description*. Wiesbaden: Franz Steiner Verlag.
- Foucault, M. 1988. *Language, counter-memory, practice: Selected essays and interviews by Michel Foucault*. Edited by D.F. Bouchard. Ithaca: Cornell University Press.
- Foucault, M. 1989. *The birth of the clinic: An archaeology of medical perception*. London: Routledge.
- Foucault, M. 2003. *Society must be defended: Lectures at the College de France 1975–76*. London: Allen Lane.
- Fried, G. 2000. *Heidegger's polemos: from Being to politics*. New Haven: Yale University Press. <http://dx.doi.org/10.12987/yale/9780300080384.001.0001>
- Fukuyama, F. 1992. *The end of history and the last man*. Harmondsworth: Penguin.
- Habermas, J. 1981. *Knowledge and human interests*. (Second edition). London: Heinemann.
- Hallin, DC. 2008. You have to understand war in order to understand our culture. *Vox Publica* [Online] Available at: <http://voxpublica.no/2008/01> [Accessed on 12 October 2011].
- Hallin, D.C. & Gitlin, T. 1993. Agon and ritual: The Gulf War as popular culture and as television drama. *Political communication* 10: 411-424. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/10584609.1993.9963002>
- Hampshire, S. 2000. *Justice is conflict*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.
- Hampshire, S. 2002. Justice is strife. *Philosophy and Social Criticism* 28(6): 635-645. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1177/019145370202800603>
- Hanson, V.D. 2000. *The Western way of war: Infantry battle in Classical Greece*. (Second edition). Berkeley: University of California Press.
- Hanson, V.D. 2004. *Ripples of battle: How the wars of the past still determine how we fight, how we live, and how we think*. New York: Anchor Books.
- Hanson, V.D. 2010. *The father of us all: War and history, ancient and modern*. New York: Bloomsbury Press.
- Hardt, M. & Negri, A. 2006. *Multitude: War and democracy in the age of empire*. London: Penguin.
- Havelock, E.A. 1972. War as a way of life in classical culture. In: Gareau, E. (ed.). *Classical values and the modern world: The Georges P Vanier memorial lectures*. Ottawa: University of Ottawa Press.
- Havelock, E.A. 1982. *Preface to Plato*. Cambridge: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press.
- Hawhee, D. 2002a. Agonism and arête. *Philosophy and rhetoric* 35(3): 185-207. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1353/par.2003.0004>
- Hawhee, D. 2002b. Bodily pedagogies: Rhetoric, athletics, and the Sophists' Three Rs. *College English* 65(2): 142-162. <http://dx.doi.org/10.2307/3250760>
- Hawhee, D. 2005. Rhetorics, bodies, and everyday life. *Rhetoric Society Quarterly* 36(2): 155-164. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/02773940600605487>
- Hawkes, J. 1972. *Dawn of the gods*. London: Sphere Books.
- Hegel, G.W.F. 1841/1910. *The phenomenology of mind*. Vol 2. Translated by J.B. Baillie. London: Swan Sonnenschein.

- Hook, S. 1962. *The hero in history. A study in limitation and possibility*. Boston: Beacon Press.
- Kagan, R. 2008. *The return of history and the end of dreams*. London: Atlantic Books.
- Kant, I. 1789/1978. *Anthropology from a pragmatic point of view*. Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press.
- King, K.C. 1991. *Achilles: Paradigms of the war hero from Homer to the middle ages*. Berkeley: University of California Press.
- Kojève, A. 1980. *Introduction to the reading of Hegel: Lectures on the Phenomenology of the spirit*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press.
- Lakoff, G. & Johnson, M. 1980. *Metaphors we live by*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Lomsky-Feder, E. 2004. Life stories, war, and veterans: On the social distribution of memories. *Ethnos* 32(1): 82-109. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1525/eth.2004.32.1.82>
- Lynn, J.A. 2004. *Battle: A history of combat and culture*. Cambridge, MA: West View Press.
- Manguel, A. 2007. *Homer's the Iliad and the Odyssey: a biography*. London: Atlantic Books.
- Mannheim, K. 1979. *Ideology and utopia: An introduction to the sociology of knowledge*. London: Routledge & Kegan Paul.
- Marx, K. 1972. The German Ideology. In: Tucker, R.C. (ed.). *The Marx-Engels Reader*. New York: WW Norton.
- McLuhan, M. 1969. *Understanding media: The extension of man*. London: Sphere Books.
- Mead, G.H. 1965. *On social psychology: selected papers*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Mead, M. 1963. Warfare: Only an invention – not a biological necessity. In: Mead, M. *Anthropology: A human science: Selected papers, 1939 – 1960*. New York: Van Nostrand.
- Meltzer, B.N., Petras, J.W. & Reynolds, L.T. 1980. *Symbolic interactionism: Genesis, varieties and criticism*. London: Routledge & Kegan Paul.
- Mouffe, C. 1993. *The return of the political*. London: Verso.
- Nietzsche, F. 1956. *The birth of tragedy and the genealogy of morals*. Translated by F. Golffing. Garden City, NY: Doubleday Anchor Books.
- Nietzsche, F. 1968. *The will to power*. New York: Vantage Books.
- Nietzsche, F. 1978. *Twilight of the idols and the Anti-Christ*. Harmondsworth: Penguin.
- Nietzsche, F. 2004. *Human, all too human*. Translated by Marion Faber and Stephen Lehmann. London: Penguin.
- Nietzsche, F. 2009. *The gay science*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Ong, W.J. 1982. *Orality and literacy: The technologizing of the word*. London: Methuen. <http://dx.doi.org/10.4324/9780203328064>
- Pagliai, V. 2009. The art of duelling with words: Toward a new understanding of verbal duels across the world. *Oral Tradition* 24(1): 61-88.

Poetry in the act of killing: The bloody origin of language and communication

- Pagliai, V. 2010. Conflict, cooperation, and facework in *Contrasto* verbal duels. *Journal of Linguistic Anthropology* 20(1): 87-100. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1111/j.1548-1395.2010.01050.x>
- Parks, W. 1986. Flying and fighting: Pathways in the realisation of the epic contest. *Neophilologus* 70: 292-306. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1007/BF00553323>
- Parks, W. 1990. Verbal duelling in heroic narrative: the Homeric and old English tradition. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.
- Ryle, G. 1966. *Plato's progress*. London: Cambridge University Press.
- Said, E.W. 1994. *Culture and imperialism*. London: Vintage.
- Seaton, J. 2005. *Carnage and the media: The making and breaking of news about violence*. London: Allen Lane/Penguin.
- Sidebottom, H. 2004. *Ancient warfare: A very short introduction*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Tatum, J. 2003. *The mourner's song: War and remembrance from the Iliad to Vietnam*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Vance, E. 1980. Roland and the poetics of memory. In: Harari, J.V. (ed.). *Textual strategies: perspectives in post-structuralist criticism*. London: Methuen.
- Van Creveld, M. 1991. *The transformation of war*. New York: Free Press.
- Vermeule, E. 1981. *Aspects of death in early Greek art and poetry*. Berkeley, CA: University of California Press.
- Winthrop-Young, G. 2011. *Kittler and the media*. Cambridge: Polity.
- Wittgenstein, L. 1988. *Philosophical investigations*. Oxford: Basil Blackwell.
- Žižek, S. 2002. *Welcome to the desert of the real: Five essays on September 11 and related dates*. London: Verso.