

## Cognitive Warfare: A Struggle for the Meaning

### Abstract

This essay pursues a robust interdisciplinary approach to the issue of cognitive warfare. The human cognition cannot operate without words. They however depend on a consensus reached within a community, they are not somehow extracted from the objects themselves. And this ability, that allows us to build interpretations upon which we can form a cooperation among millions of people, is also a huge vulnerability in the age of abundant information and private consumption of social media. To acknowledge that our knowledge is not complete is the first step towards building a cognitively resilient society.

### Introduction

What is a cognitive warfare? To answer that question and understand the problem correctly, we will need to go to the level of analysis, that touches the very nature of our being and our society: thinking. This paper deals with the civic aspect of cognitive warfare, how are information crucial for our community, not military. But these cannot be completely separated affairs. The paper is situated as follows. First, the argument about the inseparability of cognition and language is presented. Then I will briefly go through the simplified version of how the language work and social dimension of our language apparatus and therefore cognition. In the third part, I argue, that this is being eroded by social media, which allows to build new communities of roughly common interpretation of the world. The paper ends with a definition of cognitive warfare, that is built upon the arguments from the text.

## The original human condition

Warfare is often said to be the defining feature of mankind. Animals do also fight, but they do not engage in that sort of organized form of violence, which we usually call war. Some thinkers disputed, that the warfare is a natural aspect of human beings. John Keegan argued in his book *The History of Warfare*, that for some tribally organized people, the war was simply a ritual. When the first drop of blood was spilled, the war was over. Anthropologist and philosopher Ernst Gellner also disputed warfare as a natural state of being, he saw the origin of warfare in the Neolithic revolution. Hunter and gatherer societies simply could not engage in war-making, because, first, there was nothing durable enough to fight for, and second, the time needed to obtain food was too demanding on time and movement to devote it to anything else. After the long-time historical change which we call Neolithic revolution, the sedentary agricultural societies developed, which were hierarchical and had a special group of people purely devoted to ruling and war-making. They were the first specialist on war.

According to this interpretation, the war is not the defining feature of mankind, in fact, for the most of human history, wars did not exist. But what about the cognition? That is a whole different story. It seems, that cognitive abilities of humans are in fact the ultimately defining feature of their kind due to which it became the dominant specie on the planet Earth.

I think therefore, I am

Cognition is a process of combining words to produce an idea to understand the world and yourself as well. Thinking cannot exist without language. The language is not just a vehicle, that we use to transfer some information with, language is presented in the first contact with reality, it helps us to get a grasp of it, to classify it and understand it. The ability to inform and think about things real and unreal quantitatively exceeds any language-like ability of the animals. The origin of the ability to use language is still a matter of academic dispute, however the theory of Robin Dunbare, evolutionary biologist, is quite

persuasive. He argues, that our biological „cousins”, the chimpanzees, are able to form a group fifty individuals at maximum, but people can sustain personal connection with 150 individuals, however to use the physical contact as the chimpanzees do, would take too much of a valuable time. This is the moment, where the language comes in. Language allowed the early *homo sapiens* to form bigger collectives than other now extinct species as *homo erectus* and *homo neanderthalensis*, which was then inseparably accompanied by the growth of the brain.

Our society is thus founded on language, but how does language work? In this paper, I argue for the constructivist perspective, that means that the content of words is given by a consensus among members of society, not somehow extracted from the objects, or given to us by a deity. Red is simply called red for the reason we decided that. It is a colour, but may as well signalize danger, to stop at the crossroad, or a social democratic party. That depends on the context. Therefore, not only content of the word, but also the meaning, is not by itself given to us by the things themselves. The meaning is not objective, nor subjective, but intersubjective.

Moreover, this system of words and meanings, into which we are interwoven, which forms our community of the roughly same interpretation, is not static. It is in condition of constant fluidity and change. Sometimes in the slow pace, other time on the contrary in the form of rather radical shifts. For example, people used to think, that slavery is all-right, that monarchy is the only suitable form of government, that sun revolves around the Earth, or that women should not vote. We no longer think that. Our perception of the reality, our concepts through which we observe the world around us changed.

The statement, that the meaning is not permanent, also mean that it is often contested. For example, one thing may have a completely different meaning to a different sort of people. And this process of negotiating and re-negotiating of mental categories is ancient. Our ancestors had to agree, that an apple is called an apple, and it is not in fact an instrument of the original sin, but one a day, keeps a doctor away.

Sometimes, these different, or rather alternative interpretations can be quite harmless, as when someone does not want to use microwave, but

sometimes, they can prove to be otherwise, as when someone refuses to vaccinate their children. People can also have a different interpretation of history, as what was the nature of the events of 1968? Was it an occupation, or friendly assistance provided to Czechoslovakia to resist an imperialist coup?

Why is important to have a roughly the same interpretation of the reality? This feature is the key to our social organization. Benedict Anderson argues, that nations are imagined communities. That does not mean, that they are unreal, but that the anonymous mass of people is hold together by shared images and ideas about history, good life and behaviour. Yuval Noah Harrari would add, that these collective ideas, he calls them myths, are crucial for the successful cooperation between individuals. That is why *verba*, words are crucial for our existence, they hold our society together. Occupation cannot mean the same thing as a friendly assistance.

## Cognitive warfare

This indefiniteness, arbitrariness and endless negotiating of our mental categories is the target of all sorts of types of cognitive warfare. That strategy is not solely confined to our century, but the hugely limiting factor was throughout the ages, the small literacy rate, especially among the lower layers of society, who formed a significant part of the armies from the early modern age. Nevertheless, through the Thirty Years War, pamphlets describing Protestantism as the poison of Christianity were commonly circulating in Europe. Another major step in spreading information was the invention of radio, and later television. But whereas old medias as TV, radio or newspaper transmits the same message widely, social media are much more than that. Beside transmitting, they allow to connect individuals with same interpretation of the world to mobilize and form groups in the sense of Anderson's nation - imagined communities, that do not copy the geographical frontiers of states. The meanings are then strengthened online, aside from the real world, not challenged as through the school or classical media.. Individuals with this alternative sort of view are no longer feeling like swimming alone in the

dominant interpretation, but empowered by connection with like-minded (interpreting) individuals, because only few of the people can endure not being part of the majority. These may then be manipulated by all sort of actors with hostile intentions against our society to create their own „community of the roughly same interpretation” in the offline world through violent and non-violent means. Especially democratic societies for obvious reason can be this way eroded from the inside.

The cognitive aspect of today’s war is nothing radically new as I have already stated above. It is not any sixth dimension, ground, air, and naval operation have always needed to take place inside a cognitive environment, where the war had to have a meaning and some sort of support of the warriors and the public. However, it is indeed a far more important aspect than in the previous ages due to the growing availability of the computers, mobile phones and internet connection. Besides that, social media allows to target globally a massive amount of people with a specifically tailored message, that may exploit existing grievances and interpretation ruptures in the society and destroy its sense of unity and consequently a will to defend against a certain adversaries. As Karel Řehka writes: *If the society does not manifest its determination to defend itself, armed forces cannot fulfil their basic role, which is deterring of potential adversaries.*”

To remotely paraphrase a dead Prussian classic, cognitive warfare is thus a deliberate focus of one collective of wills to erode the ability to think and reach a tolerable consensus of the other collective of wills and subjugate this collective to act in a manner favourable to the first collective. To defend ourselves, we must first acknowledge, that our mental schemes are far from being absolute and perfect and devote our energy to explaining how the knowledge is created and qualified conclusion about the world produced. Than is the first step to make our society cognitively resilient.

---

## Bibliography

Alvarová, Alexandra. *Průmysl lží*. (Praha: Triton, 2017)

Ajir, Medi, Bethany, Vailant „Russian Information Warfare: Implications for Deterrence Theory“ in *Strategic Studies Quarterly* 12/3 (2018)

Anderson, Benedict. *Představy společenství: Úvahy o původu a šíření nacionalismu* (Praha: Karolinum, 2008)

Bakshy, Eytan, Messing, Solomon and Adamic, Lada „Exposure to ideologically diverse news and opinions on Facebook“ in *Science Express* (May/2015)

von Clausewitz, Carl. „On War“ (Oxford: OUP, 2007)

Dunbar, Robin. *Příběh rodu Homo*. (Praha: Academia, 2009),

Fukala, Radek. *Třicetiletá válka 1618–1648 - Pod vítězným praporem habsburské moci: I. Díl 1618-1629* (České Budějovice: Veduta, 2018)

Gellner, Ernst. *Pluh, meč a kniha*. (Brno: CDK, 2001),

Kuhn, Thomas S. *Struktura vědeckých revolucí*. (Praha: Oikoymenh, 1997)

Keegan, John. *A History of Warfare*. (New York: Vintage Books, 1994),

Hall, Stuart. ed. *Representation: Cultural Representations and Signifying Practices*. (Londýn: Sage, 1997)

Harrari, Yuval Noah. *Sapiens. Úchvatný i úděsný příběh lidstva*. (Praha: Leda,

2014)

Morillo, Stephen and Pavkovic, Michal F. What Is Military History, Kindle ed. (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2018)

Nietzsche, Friedrich. O pravdě a lži ve smyslu nikoliv morálním. (Praha: Oikoymenh, 2010)

Řehka, Karel. Informační válka. (Praha: Academia, 2017)

de Saussure, Ferdinand. Kurs obecné lingvistiky. (Praha: Academia, 1996)

Sokol, Jan. Malá filosofie člověka. (Praha: Vyšehrad, 2010)