

AN ANALYSIS OF THE LINGUISTIC TECHNIQUES OF PROPAGANDA IN  
MARKETING AND POLITICS

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## AN ANALYSIS OF THE LINGUISTIC TECHNIQUES

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## Abstract

Propaganda may be defined as the deliberate use of manipulation techniques in order to persuade the audience towards a biased opinion which helps a greater power or authority to develop the desirable perspective/choice in the target group. Though initially recognised with positive connotations, “propaganda” today is recognised as corrupt means frequently applied in politics and advertisements to subtly influence public opinion on a large scale which appear seemingly stochastic. This paper intends to explore the various linguistics techniques applied in order to promulgate propaganda and the effects they tend to have on the audience. Amongst the techniques varying from auditory to visual modes of propagation, this paper analyses the modes of establishing rhetoric through the use of language, standard parlance, prosody and other semiotic modalities in a public discourse.

*Keywords:* Propaganda, manipulation, linguistic, techniques, language, parlance, prosody, semiotic modalities.

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### WHAT IS PROPAGANDA

The origins of the semantics of propaganda are rooted in promulgation of “ideas that would not occur naturally, but only via a cultivated or artificial generation” by the Roman Catholic Church. It would also be translated as “spreading good news”. Despite its positive origins, the term “propaganda” has come to carry pejorative connotations today, intended as techniques to intelligently mould and transform public opinion in a biased fashion by an authority or power groups to serve their narrow interests. Propaganda is not about popularising certain slogans or catchphrases but about fixating ideas in the public’s subconscious in a manner so subtly crafted that the manipulative ideas seem like independent foregone conclusions to the public.

“But if thought corrupts language, language can also corrupt thought”, George Orwell.

### WHERE IS PROPAGANDA APPLIED

#### **PUBLIC AWARENESS CAMPAIGNS:**

Not all propaganda is intended to malign or to spread obscurantist, half baked information for selfish interests. Any information that is propagated to influence your thought or choice is propaganda. The various awareness campaigns issued in public interests like anti-smoking ads, planting trees campaigns, anti-plastic ads, anti-pollution ads, anti-littering ads, speeding, gambling, racial discrimination awareness, obesity and healthy nutrition ads make the cut for beneficial propaganda.

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**BUSINESS:**

Advertisements go as far back as consumerism does. Propaganda is essential to the sustenance of the free market wherein a plethora of products, services and resources are available for the consumer to choose from. The race is not just about providing better quality products at affordable rates but also about presenting and popularising the goods in a palatable manner to the audience. An advertisement using persuasive techniques will exaggerate its pros using several techniques like Pathos which means appealing to the consumer's emotions or Logos which means appealing to the consumer's logics. An advertisement in these cases will promise to provide you "joy" or will be claimed to be supported by scientists in respective cases.

"There is a simple way to package information that, under the right circumstances, can make it irresistible. All you have to do is find it." — Malcolm Gladwell, *The Tipping Point: How Little Things Can Make a Big Difference*

The consumerist culture today is all about packaging the information in the right manner and less about packaging the products.

**POLITICS:**

"Propaganda is to a democracy what the bludgeon is to a totalitarian state." - Noam Chomsky, *The Spectacular Achievements of Propaganda*. Modern democracy cannot be imagined to function without an extravagantly funded political campaign, pompous promising speeches and candidates with a flair for speaking. All of these are modes of feeding propaganda to the public whereby the intention is not to acquaint the voters with a choice but to make them believe in what is right and wrong. As said by George Orwell, "political speech and writing are largely the defence of the indefensible. Things like the continuance of British rule in India, the Russian purges and deportations, the dropping of the atom bombs on Japan, can

indeed be defended, but only by arguments which are too brutal for most people to face, and which do not square with the professed aims of the political parties. Thus, political language has to consist largely of euphemism, question-begging and sheer cloudy vagueness.

Defenceless villages are bombarded from the air, the inhabitants driven out into the countryside, the cattle machine-gunned, the huts set on fire with incendiary bullets: this is called *pacification*. Millions of peasants are robbed of their farms and sent trudging along the roads with no more than they can carry: this is called *transfer of population* or *rectification of frontiers*. People are imprisoned for years without trial, or shot in the back of the neck or sent to die of scurvy in Arctic lumber camps: this is called *elimination of unreliable elements*.”

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### TECHNIQUES OF PROPAGANDA

Information can be presented in the form of texts, audios, pictures, videos, slogans and catchphrases and almost all other means of communication. The impact of propaganda is realised only on a large scale in which the opinions of a number of people can be moulded in one strike. Propaganda campaigns often follow a strategic transmission pattern to indoctrinate the target group. The most common element of indoctrination is the use of repetition. The same information is branded and presented in different ways and forms to the audience at various occasions so frequently that it comes to be accepted as common knowledge. Comprehensible, easy to memorise, catchy slogans are indispensable especially in political propaganda.

Common examples are

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“Germany for Germans” during Hitler’s Germany or recent being “Make America Great Again” initiated by Donald Trump.

Some of the linguistic techniques used for dissemination of propaganda are:

**Rhetoric:** Rhetoric can be defined as the structured way in which a message is conveyed i.e. the choice of words and the mode of argument employed. As said by Aristotle, an argument can be presented by the use of either Ethos, Pathos or Logos.

**Ethos** is the argument based on evoking the credibility of the person making the argument. For instance, a toothpaste advertisement might say that their product is recommended by 9 out of 10 dental specialists in order to present a case.

**Pathos** is the argument based on evoking emotions and morality in the audience. A government may pander to voters’ emotions for next elections despite inflation and tax hikes claiming how foregoing subsidies by the middle class enabled the lower classes to attain basic amenities like electricity provided the government.

**Logos** is the argument that panders to logic or the appearance of such. But it is difficult to convince the masses by the use of logics alone, the audience must feel a personal connect to the case. Hence in order to mobilise a large group of people, it is more common for demagogues to evoke an emotional response that is more long-lasting than catering data and statistics that often escapes the memory of simpletons.

Rhetoric is used to strengthen your case in an argument but in the scenario of not having a strong argument, rhetorical fallacies i.e. exaggerated arguments are made.

For example, during the Second World War, a poster in the United States urging the

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public to consume lesser oil was made quite popular. The poster encouraged the public to share rides and use lesser oil and was captioned “RIDING ALONE IS TAKING A RIDE WITH HITLER”. While the intended message of the poster was positive, the mode of the argument was a rhetorical fallacy.

Ad Nauseam or Ad infinitum or Repetition: This refers to an argument that has been so many times as to evoke nausea or to the point of infinity. This mode of propaganda involves the most and perhaps the most effective form of propaganda, even before the development of sophisticated propaganda techniques, is the use of repetition. The idea is to constantly bombard the target groups with the intended message that it gradually becomes to be accepted as the norm or the truth. The message finally gets imprinted into the public’s mind and seems like a foregone conclusion. The United States military intervention in West Asia at the pretext of “bringing democracy” in a land of autocracy has been widely accepted as the truth as a result of rigorous malicious propaganda.

Weasel Words: Weasel words are words that actually have no meaning or aren’t meant to be taken literally, highly unspecific and scrupulously used while making a claim. The logical fallacy of weasel words lies in the use of words indicating high surety in an obscure manner which can evade future challenging. Common examples may be a soap advertisement claiming to terminate 99.9% of germs or “millions of people believe in XYZ product”. Upon asking for reconfirmation or proof of the above claims, the challenge can be discarded on grounds of non-seriousness.

**Causation vs Correlation:** This is a very malicious use of data or legitimate information available at hand manipulated to convey something completely different from what originally intended. The idea is to prove that an event B occurs due to an event A, even when the case may actually not be so. An exaggerated example of causation vs correlation can be: Babies drink milk. Babies cry. Hence milk makes babies cry. Causation vs correlation is widely used in politics wherein opposing political parties tend to blame all lows in every arena from economy to droughts on the reigning power.

**Begging the Question or Petitio Principii:** Begging the question is a form of logical fallacy which is manifested by circular reasoning. In this form of dialogue, the truth of a conclusion is presupposed and the premise instead of supporting or proving the conclusion, is based on the conclusion.

**Gish Galloping:** Gish Galloping is a common tactic used in debates or throw off the opponent is a discourse by making a number of false claims in quick successions that doesn't leave the opponent with enough time to respond to all. For example, a male chauvinist may claim, "A female president will lead to disruption in external relations, economy downfall and civil unrest". None of these may be funded on concrete evidence but someone wanting to refute this will take more time and effort than required to initially make a frivolous statement like this. Hence, the burden of proof falls on the opponent and failing to refute even a single point (called the Single Point Fallacy) tips the scale against them.

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**Intensity:** It refers to the use of unnecessary superlatives in order to amplify the impact of a claim. This is manifested by advertisements claiming their goods to be “the best “, “the most effective”, the “highest quality”, “the highest rated” and other similar claims that aren’t backed by any concrete proof but are meant to only add to the intensity of the claim.

**Glittering Generalities:** Glittering generalities, as the name suggests, is the unscrupulous of certain “virtue words”, that invoke an emotionally positive responses in consumers or audience, in a vague manner. The Institute for Propaganda Analysis defines it as 'name calling in reverse. A good example would be Adolf Hitler claiming, “The German countryside must be protected at all costs for it is and forever has been the source of strength and greatness for the people”. Here, the words “strength” and “greatness” can be classified under Glittering Generalities as they do not convey anything specific but convince people of protecting reason for no plausible reason, but by the positive connotations imprinted in the public mind with respect to “Strength” and “Greatness .

**Name Calling:** As the name suggests, Name Calling is the practice of attaching certain names, qualities, traits generally with negative connotations to an opposing group without any feasible explanations. Name calling is a category of Ad Hominem wherein instead of making logical arguments, the opponent’s personality or characteristics are attacked and stereotyped negatively.

**Pensée Unique:** Pensée Unique refers to the dominant ideology in politics or otherwise which is continually supported by the majority population. It is a pejorative

for accepting the mainstream opinion without further analysis. It seeks to amplify the commonly held public bias and preconceived notions. Pensée Unique acts as a barrier to opening new perceptions and to new dialogues by sticking to the accepted form of truth. It is a propaganda strengthening tactic.

**Bandwagon:** The form of argument wherein a group of people is convinced to purchase a product or endorse a personality on grounds of “popular consensus”. It is to say that “everyone is doing it “ and to create a Fear of Missing Out or makes one second guess their own choice if it contradicts the popular opinion. The various exit polls before an election carefully manipulated to project a particular party as the winner can significantly affect the voters’ choices.

**Sex Appeal:** Sex and erotica have been used since times immemorial to sell and gain traction for a product. Mainly used in consumerism, an advertisement for a product is laced with sexual innuendos and suggestive pictures leading little to imagination in order to capture the audience’s attention. Though recent studies have suggested that despite attracting the audience’s attention hugely, sex appeal doesn’t hike the purchase of a product as the erotic factor becomes central to the advertisement taking the spotlight away from the goods.

**Cherry Picking:** Cherry picking, as the name suggests, refers to selective presentation of facts in order to further an argument. It includes deliberate obfuscation of facts and misleading of the masses by half baked truths.

Information Overload or Over Complication or Loaded Language: This refers to the use of over complicated language to derail the audience or to inundate and argument with sophisticated language beyond the understanding of common masses to present an apparent air of superiority, authority and credibility. Loaded language is mostly emotionally heavy language meant to sway the masses such as using the word “reform” instead of changes”. Quoting from George Orwell’s Politics and the English Language, “The greatest enemy of language is insincerity. When there is a gap between one’s real and declared aims, one turns as it were instinctively to long words and exhausted idioms...As I have tried to show modern writing at its worst does not consist of picking out words for the sake of their meanings and inventing images to make the meaning clearer. It consists of gumming together long strips of words which have already been set in order by someone else”.

Black and White Fallacies: The implication that there are only two sides to a situation or only two options to an issue is called Black and White fallacy. Often to support one’s own agenda, one may pitted a highly improbable or unpopular counterpart against them in order to polarise support. This kind of fallacy helps to align even the non-aligned, neutral audience towards the speaker as it implies, if they are not supporting the aforementioned speaker, they are siding with the second improbable and worse choice. The finest example of Black and White Fallacy is George Bush’s famous statement, “If you are not with us, you are with them (terrorists)”, hence amassing huge support for his personal politics.

Whataboutism: Whataboutism is the logical fallacy that seeks to evade the opponent’s arguments by directing a question to them instead in a deflected direction generally

starting with “What about...”, instead of actually answering the questions. It is to say as to why a particular point, to the speaker’s disadvantage, is being raised when a number of other points, to the speaker’s advantage or the opponent’s disadvantage could be made.

Euphemism: The use of politically correct words or phrases in place of inflammatory, provocative or offensive ones that might lead to withdrawal of public support is called euphemism. The use of the term “collateral damage” meaning indirect, unintentional harm caused to non-combatants in a war or war-like situation. The insinuation is appalling when compared to the extent of damage actually perpetrated towards non-participants in a conflict.

Dysphemism: Dysphemism is the opposite of euphemism, meaning the use of socially unacceptable or “taboo” terms in place of more pacifist or politically correct term. Dysphemism is a technique of name calling and stereotyping and serves to provoke the audience against some other group.

Guilt by Association or Reductio ad Hitlerum: As the name implies, guilt by association is the experience or made to experience guilt because of being in association with some socially ostracised or infamous groups, instead of any personal fault. It can be considered some sort of psychological incrimination of certain demographics for belonging to or associating with miscreants. The rise in Islamophobia globally can be attributed to the same.

Third Party Technique: Third party technique refers to the technique of having your arguments supported by somebody not a part of the dialogue, that is, a neutral party. The credibility comes from the belief that an independent party not pursuing any selfish interests in a given issue can be more reliable than the participating parties who will obviously be biased. Third Party Technique is widely used in journalism wherein journalists or media houses are paid to report in a certain manner beneficial to the paying groups. It is not uncommon for political parties or celebrities have full fledged

### EXAMPLES OF PROPAGANDA

Noam Chomsky mentions in his book, *The Spectacular Achievements of Propaganda*, the first modern government propaganda operation carried out by the Woodrow Wilson Administration in 1916 organised by a committee called The Creel Commission which succeeded merely in a time period of six months in converting a pacifist American population into a “war mongering, hysterical” jingoists. “There was a good deal of fabrication of atrocities by the Huns, Belgian babies with their arms torn off, all sorts of awful things that you still read in history books. Much of it was invented by the British propaganda ministry, whose own commitment at the time, as they put it in their secret deliberations, was "to direct the thought of most of the world."

Similarly, in the territorial disputes of Ukraine and Russia, a seemingly innocuous propaganda technique has been a cause of much conflict. The spelling of the Ukrainian capital as mentioned in Western papers is “Kiev” which is actually a derivative from its Russian spelling. The Ukrainian transliteration gives the spelling “Kyiv” which is used and being propagated by Ukrainian journalists to promote the state’s sovereignty.

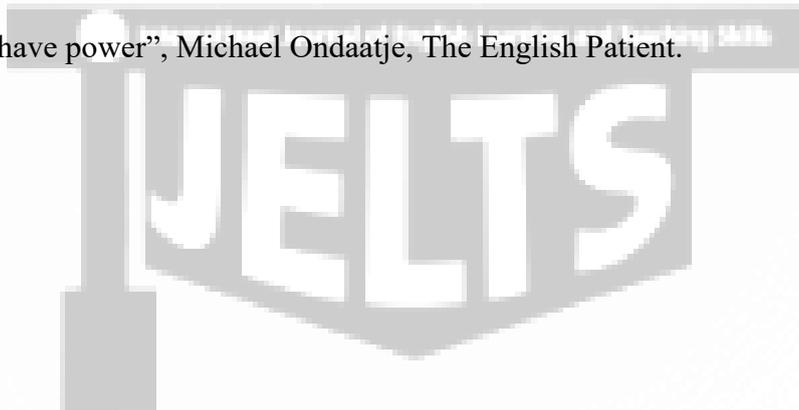
### FINAL WORDS

The propaganda ingrained in commercial, political and gradually ingrained into day to day language isn't incidental but a part of an intricately woven scheme meant to mould the public mind in specific directions by a very small group of people.

“But the most brilliant propagandist technique will yield no success unless one fundamental principle is borne in mind constantly and with unflagging attention. It must confine itself to a few points and repeat them over and over. Here, as so often in this world, persistence is the first and most important requirement for success.”

— **Adolf Hitler**

“Words. They have power”, Michael Ondaatje, *The English Patient*.



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