

# Understanding Propaganda from the Perspectives of General Semantics

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## ABSTRACT

*Propaganda is making inroad in societies and its impact is so tremendous. Through the proliferation of the mass media and ICT, propaganda messages can reach the audience within a few seconds. Sometimes, manipulation, misinformation and disinformation do occur through propagandistic messages without readers realizing it. Nonetheless, not all propaganda is bad. Many scholars claim that “truth” is part of propaganda, for example, propaganda for peace is used during conflicts and insurgency. But bad propaganda, such as the maniacal Fuhrer Hitler’s evil intention to conquer all European nations is quite disastrous to mankind. This paper, introduces a general semantics approach of balance thinking as to evaluate language of propaganda. General semanticists always believe that the principle of general semantics is the last bastion of preconceived mind and bias inherent in propaganda messages. As Korzybski wrote, “it is probably no secret that a large part of the population of this world was swayed by propaganda during war”. And the interdisciplinary method of general semantics which is providing us a mechanism of evaluative habits of our everyday language and awareness may be useful for verbal peace movement.*

**Keywords:** *General Semantics, Propaganda, Two-Value Orientation, Abstraction, Undue Identification*

## Introduction

The Vatican established the *Congregation the Propaganda Fide* or “Congregation for the Propaganda of Faith in 1622 to synchronize the ideas of religion to preach and entice through artificial generation, which

goes together without the people accepting voluntarily the teaching of Christianity. However, after 400 years, the word propaganda became synonymous to war.

In the Second World War, the German used propaganda as the second instrument to orchestrate propaganda to demoralize the enemy's strength and persuade the people of German to enhance moral support of Hitler's maniacal views and ambition of conquering European nations. It was then. Propaganda was done for many reasons; to ask the people of a country to continue to sacrifice in order to help the war effort; give money or themselves to serve in the war; to keep people's spirits high; and to warn of the consequences of losing.

A German minister of propaganda, Joseph Goebbels had aptly described the function of words and symbols. He said if they were repeatedly pounded into human mind, eventually all lies would turn out a reality. In the case of raising the spirit of German people, Goebbels had succeeded in making German united under Fuhrer Hitler under the slogan "National Socialism: The Organized Will of the Nation". In his short description Goebbels says:

"It would not be impossible to prove with sufficient repetition and psychological understanding of the people concerned that a square is in fact a circle. What after all are a square and a circle? They are mere words and words can be molded until they clothe ideas in disguise".

Pratkanis and Aronson, 2008

Today, in the era of technology where communication becomes part and parcel of human life, propaganda becomes rather sophisticated and propaganda tactics based on hypocrisy and false allegations are included. For instance, in the Cold War period propaganda messages were disseminated through films, books, radio, television and the new media such as the Internet and all these media have been used extensively to mime public emotion. From then on, the word, propaganda conjures up all sorts of negative connotation-from brainwashing to dirty tricks to outright lying (Mohd Rajib & Taylor, 2006). While we disliked the word propaganda, nevertheless, we agreed that propaganda for truth or propaganda for peace had positive advantages to the development of mankind. But if it is a kind of lie and manipulation of the mind by a person of overbearing attitude and beliefs, propaganda is disastrous to the public mind. For instance terrorism, we are all against it and nor do we agree with war propaganda from legitimate states. Thus, this paper

will look into the possibility of understanding propaganda from the framework of the general semantics principle, as it claims a child of war in some sense, a sort of verbal peace movement.

## **Films and Other Medium: A Mother of All Propaganda**

Films are the most up-to-date propaganda vehicles in which propaganda messages can be disseminated through verbal such as words, and non-verbal messages such as pictures and movements. This was certainly the case in the Russian Revolution of 1917. The Bolsheviks and Lenin, their leader, sought to use film portraying events of the revolution in such a way as to unify the Russian peasantry. Film maker Sergei Eisenstein was one of those recruited for the task. *Battleship Potemkin* and *October*, were powerful in framing the Russian Revolution in the eyes of the world and his own people. Lenin's often quoted view was "for us the most important of all art is the cinema" (Taylor, 2003, p. 202). In the 20<sup>th</sup> century, this "new" propaganda emerged, which revolved around political organizations and their need to communicate messages that would "sway relevant groups of people in order to accommodate their agendas" to influence the opinions or behavior of the people, often by providing deliberately misleading, propagandistic messages through motion pictures (Todd, 2002).

During the Cold War period, the US and Russia were championing almost all propaganda issues targeting the world population to support their foreign policy. The US mobilized almost all its government machinery and policy against the Soviet Union. Thus, started the period we refer to as The Red Scare, when mass hysteria over communism reigned. The government's encouragement of this hysteria took form in movies, books, comics, and was even taught in school (Levin, 1971).

The United States government worked very hard to create the perfect broadcasts. They also poured in a lot of money to reach other countries. We see now that in 1948, they gave "approximately \$10,000,000 to the Voice of America", which was broadcasted in the Philippines as well as parts of Japan and Germany (VOA online, 2005). Radio stations that we still know of, such as Voice of America, were known as spreaders of 'black' propaganda. The government poured a huge amount of money into helping movie industries to grow, preferring movies that "dramatized the Communist threat". Some classics of the time were "Red Nightmare", (<http://www.detrick.army.mil/dctee/training/videotapes.pdf>) which is

known today as “*The Commies Are Coming!*” Another is “*Invasion, USA!*” All these movies, in which at one time important to American people are now considered comedy and even kitsch. They were even taught in schools as part of the curriculum. “Red Nightmare” was taught as part of the “standard curriculum in civics and history”. Other anti-Soviet movies, such as the James Bond series, are still enjoyed to date.

Literature is another form of propaganda. It had been used even before we embrace modernization, and was a cheap way for many people to consume propaganda. Paperback novels, so-called non-fiction books, and comics were all used as methods of implanting doctrine. Paperbacks about fictional heroes defeating anti-American (or Communist) threats were big hits, and usually sold very cheaply. These books usually focused around a cowboy or a soldier who had to go up against something terrible but always saved the day. The books would sometimes circle around an ordinary citizen who was doing his American duties, and these were also big hits. The non-fiction books were in-fact very fictional, or at least extremely biased. They were almost always about Communism and why it was bad, how it was threatening America, and how Soviets were lurking around every corner just waiting to strike. Then, there were comics. They were naturally geared towards the children. Typically, a comic will have a hero and an action plot, anyway. These comics, however, took a twist-in comic entitled “*Is This Tomorrow?*” where Russians are shown “conquering and enslaving America.” (*Is This Tomorrow?* is a comic strip created by Kelly Shane & Woody Compton).

As we know, propaganda is still alive today. People think that they are better at realizing it, and perhaps they are; or maybe it is just that hindsight is 20/20. We are all being influenced in some way. The US had spent about \$300m, three-year effort to “engage and inspire” Iraq’s population to support its government and US policies through a variety of programmes ranging from media products to entertainment (an additional \$15m a year would be spent polling Iraqis) (Brown, 2008).

Because propaganda activities had naturally been imbued under the name of persuasion which is not necessarily used during the war, hence, the word propaganda has changed its form and meaning. Various nomenclatures are used to termed propaganda activities so that it does not look negative to the public. Government renamed propaganda to public diplomacy, and public affairs. Scholars used the term strategic communication and the military used the term psychological operation and information operation. Nonetheless, all terms denote almost similar meaning and the operators have almost similar roles that are to influence

the target audience to follow the objectives and goals of the sponsors. The mass media and PR firms are also involved in propaganda mission during wars and political campaign but thoughtful media practitioners and some mass media scholars have contended that since the mass media take such function to educate, entertain and inform the public, thus, media are not involved in propaganda campaign. It is a form of persuasion that everybody makes to make other people believe and at the same time leaving a choice to the public.

Consider only a few reputable scholars of propaganda, probably the role of the mass media and PR practitioners can be reviewed either they are propagandists or just abiding messengers. In Smith (1989), Editor of *Propaganda: A Pluralistic perspective*, defined propaganda as “any conscious and open attempt to influence the beliefs of the individual or group, guided by the predetermined end and characterized by the systematic use of the irrational and often unethical techniques of persuasion”. Along similar lines, Jowett and O’Donnell (1999, p. 80). defined advertising which is a part of propaganda, “as a series of appeals, the receiver of the messages towards the point of view desired by the communicator and to act in some specific way as a result of receiving the messages, whether it be to purchase, vote, hold positive or negative views, or merely to maintain a memory. Advertising is not always in the best interest of the receiver. According to Snow (2003), the US has been spending a huge amount of money propagating new propaganda techniques against the war on terror including language manipulation through the establishment of international broadcasting. As we know any form of media either radio, television, movies or newspapers, words are the most substantive element of communication and the power of persuasion lies primarily on words.

Taylor and Moorcraft (2005) exposed in their book, *Shooting the Messengers*, that as a result of strong cooperative effort of both the government officials and the media, Pentagon had made an agreement between media and the government that was stated in the US Public Affairs Guidance on Embedded Media that says:

Media coverage of any future operation will to a large extent shape public perception of the National Security Environment now and in the year ahead. This holds true in the US public, the public in the allied countries whose opinion can affect the durability of our coalition, and publics, in countries where we conduct operations whose perceptions on us can affect the course and duration of our

involvement. Our ultimate strategic success in bringing peace and security to this region will come in our long-term commitment to supporting our democratic ideals. We need to tell the factual story – good and bad – before others seed the media with disinformation and distortions, as they most certainly will continue to do so. Our people in the field need to tell our story (p. 184).

*According to Snow (2003, p. 27), The New York Times*, one of the US most reputable newspapers and the so-called “newspaper of record” had against the principle of “objectivity by taking a very significant role in propaganda by printing all the news that’s fit to print” about the full spectrum of Bush’s administration and activities. All information is fed by the government officials especially occurring those behind doors or on distance battlefields.

Do the media, PR firms, government public diplomacy and public affair mission run propaganda mission for either the sponsors or for self-fulfilling prophecy? The answer is yes. With the advancement of communication technology and the new media such as the Internet, propaganda messages through words and picture are so rampant in the media and the new media. The messengers of the media do not really bother to realize that they are doing propaganda on the audiences; instead they claimed that they are only persuading the audience through messages but not manipulating their mind through the art of persuasion. Either the rational is accepted or not but considering advertising in the media, for example is having a verisimilitude in characters. General semanticists may prove the point that each of us is living in the age of propaganda.

## **General Semantics and Propaganda**

Most of the empirical studies of belief systems, researchers and scholars have consistency accepted the body of knowledge referred to as “general semantics”. This study of general semantics emphasizes on the study of how people perceive the world and how they subsequently communicate their perceptions or misperception. In the teaching of general semantics, words do not represent the thing it refers to. Different people may perceive differently the meaning of word based on their biasness. The core concept in the teaching of general semantics is that anything in this world is perceived differently by different people. Thus, in any given word, people who use and listen may and perceived the meaning of

word differently. But if the word is used resistively, the listeners may finally create a verisimilitude of perception of overbearing attitude (Hayakawa, 1978). Clearly the concept and system of “Aristotelian language” has brought advantages to the propagandists. One of the empirical study that deals with perception and misperception is embodied in the study of general semantics theory that reinforced Korzybski’s original statement in which he emphasized that most of today’s communication language use “Aristotelian concept of language” that leads mankind to a more problematic and confuse world.

### **The Mechanism of Words and Symbols**

Since the early history of mankind, words and symbol has been used as a communicative tool and one of the vehicles that made mankind survive and progress. Words and symbols are persuasive tool either to unify the community through knowledge expansion or they can also destroy society, nation and mankind.

Since words according to general semanticists, is an abstract and inadequate to explain the actual meaning, therefore they can be used to manipulate the public mind.

Dictionaries deal with the world of intentional meanings, but there is another world that dictionaries ignore – the word of extensional meanings. Lee wrote that intentional meanings are based on verbal expression (Lee, 1941: 120). Lee further wrote:

When we have become extensionalized in our reaction, when we go to life facts (or to the descriptive data of others) prior to making statements, we go by them in making evaluations. The extent to which these habits of response are learned and applied gives us measure for distinguishing the farthest reaches of human linguistic achievement from infantile babbling and noise-making. To speak without such checking is to indulge in neuromuscular grunts and cries which may interest a voice specialist, but they help us little in dealing with a recalcitrant world.

The obvious example is during wartime and political campaign. Since war and political campaign are always involving dichotomy of beliefs. These would always be in parallel ways where media and propaganda go together to persuade people to take side. When there is an outbreak of war, there will always be media coverage and will be propaganda

messages disseminated by the media of both warring parties. Every conflict is fought at least to the grounds. The good is against the evil and the evil claims that they are good, fighting against the evil. Both sides are working on disseminating distorted news, misinformed, exaggeration, inaccuracy and fabrication of information to demoralize enemy's strength through words. The famous American Journalist Walter Lippmann (1955) had contended that the art of democracy requires as what he termed the "manufacturing consent". The whole idea is the government cannot control people by force, but it has better control of their mind, of course through propaganda. Thus, propaganda is always involving the game of words and symbols. Today, propaganda of words and symbols or symbolism becomes so aggressive and rampant due to the advancement of mass media and information technology.

### **How Propagandist Manipulates Words, Symbols and Symbolism**

To a non-propagandist, using and choosing words to communicate with others is relatively natural but to a propagandist words are properly chosen to entice or influence people to follow the objective of propagandist. Propagandist targets human vulnerability through carefully crafted words and symbols and symbolism and playing their emotion through human existing value and bias. The propagandist may suggest something in the manner that are favourable to the receivers. The receivers may perceive those words and symbols as theirs and subsequently communicate their perceptions or misperceptions to benefit the propagandist. Since language is non-scientific, the Aristotelian language is obviously inadequate to make the listeners visualize the reality; therefore manipulation process through words and symbols is easy to create just as perception on things are being said.

Alfred Korzybski, in *Science and Sanity* (1938), says unscientific or Aristotelian assumptions about language (language of everyday life) and reality had resulted in semantically inadequate or inappropriate behaviour. The two value system in Aristotelian language such as "bad" and "good", "ugly and beautiful" and many more words as those in the dictionaries are being used in everyday communication especially in the mass media almost every minutes. The words of prejudice are easily being manipulated by propagandist since the words themselves are not enough to explain the actual things. The use of Aristotelian concept of



language by propagandists is deeply discussed by Hayakawa in his book, *Language in Thoughts and Action* (1978).

## **The Use of Abstract Words**

Basically man does not have the ability to explain in details things around him in words. They are usually immense, and therefore words are used to describe within his comprehension or generalization which on many occasions are seldom accurate. According to semanticists the symbol, the map and the world is not the thing symbolized, not the territory (Korzybski, 1938, Johnson, 1946 and Hayakawa, 1978). Assertion is commonly used in advertising and modern propaganda. An assertion is an enthusiastic or energetic statement presented as a fact, although it is not necessarily true. They often imply that the statement requires no explanation or back up, but that it should merely be accepted without question. Examples of assertion, although somewhat scarce in wartime propaganda, can be found often in modern advertising propaganda. Any time an advertiser states that their product is the best without providing evidence for this, they are using an assertion. The subject, ideally, should simply agree to the statement without searching for additional information or reasoning. Assertions, although usually simple to spot, are often dangerous forms of propaganda because they often include falsehoods or lies.

## **Two Value Orientations**

The phrase “Either you are with us or against us” emanated from the former U.S. President George W. Bush had eventually resulted in the invasion of Afghanistan and Iraq. This two value orientation phrase is associated with dogmatism and close-mindedness, although it might not be intended for propaganda (Black, 2001). The words of two value orientation such as “good and bad”, “ugly and beautiful”, “strong and weak” and all sorts of value laden words and phrases are constantly being used during wars for the purpose of propaganda to undermine the adversaries. Bandwagon propaganda is, essentially, trying to convince the subject that one side is the winning side. Bandwagon is one of the most common techniques in both wartime and peacetime and plays an important part in modern advertising. Bandwagon is also one of the seven

main propaganda techniques identified by the Institute for Propaganda Analysis in 1938. Bandwagon is an appeal to the subject to follow the crowd, to join in because others are doing so as well.

### **Undue Identification**

Labelling people, groups of people and a nation with names derogatory in nature is another form of propaganda. Propagandists termed labelling as name calling which occurs often in politics and wartime scenarios, but very seldom in advertising. It is another form of the seven main techniques designated by the Institute for Propaganda Analysis. It is the use of derogatory language or words that carry a negative connotation when describing an enemy. During the aftermath of 9/11, the United States had been using immense words of glittering generalities or undue identification on Saddam and his regime to the extent of creating anger to all Islamic worlds. Sentences and phrases such as “Why does God allow evil men like Hitler and Saddam to come into power?” and terms like “Islamic terrorists”, “Satan”, “Dictator” and many more words of glittering generalities appear on the media. The propaganda attempts to arouse prejudice among the public by labelling the target individual or group something that the public dislikes tend to be successful. Often, name calling is employed using sarcasm and ridicule, and shows up often in political cartoons or writings. When examining name calling propaganda, we should attempt to separate our feelings about the name and the actual idea or proposal.

### **Unconscious Projection**

Glittering generalities was one of the seven main propaganda techniques identified by the Institute for Propaganda Analysis in 1938. It also occurs very often in politics and political propaganda. Psychologically, no one could escape from his personal bias that he accumulates through his own experience. If a man encounters something such as an event or a person or a situation, he might associate with his experience even though what he encounters is something new to him. This unconscious projection termed by general semantics is something natural to human beings; since intrapersonal communication is part of human communication process, no one could run away from talking based on his experience that eventually

develop his perception towards things, events or persons whom he encounters. Knowing the weaknesses of the target audience, propagandists will ingeniously craft the words of predetermine end that is congruent with the frame of thoughts of the propagandees. Glittering generalities are words that have different positive meaning for individual subjects, but are linked to highly valued concepts. When words of glittering generalities are used, they demand approval without thinking, simply because such an important concept is involved. For example, when a person is asked to do something in “defense of democracy” they are more likely to agree. The concept of democracy has a positive connotation to them because it is linked to a concept that they value. Words often used as glittering generalities are honor, glory, love of country, and especially in the United States, freedom. When coming across with glittering generalities, we should especially consider the merits of the idea itself when separated from specific words.

## **Conclusion**

Since we leave in the age of information, propaganda message becomes our bread and butter. It is absolutely impossible for us to avoid from listening, reading and watching bias messages from either individuals or the mass media, and we could not even run away from being manipulated by propagandists. However, general semanticist has given us a choice where we could always evaluate and shield ourselves from propagandist’s manipulations. The empirical findings to the body of knowledge as general semantics have many time proven that the credibility of research on human perception and misperception, bias and prejudicial mind that can be of great importance to shield someone from propagandistic messages or it is useful for propaganda analysis. However, Black (2001, p. 131) had suggested a list of semantic “awareness” that people may use in media warfare and communication in order to avoid enduring values, bias and prejudice. The descriptions of sophisticated “sane” language behaviour are given below:

1. Awareness that our language is not our reality, but it is an inevitable imperfect abstraction of that reality.
2. Awareness that the use of *to be* to describe something usually reveals more about the observers’ projecting their biases than it does about the object described.

3. Awareness that people and situations have unlimited characteristics, that the world is in a constant process of change, that our perceptions are limited and that our language cannot say all there is to be said about a person or a situation.
4. Awareness that a fact is not an inference and an inference is not a value judgment, and subsequent awareness that receivers of our communication needs to be told the differences.
5. Awareness that different people will perceive the world differently, and we should accept authority figures', sources' and witnesses' view-points as being the result of imperfect perceptual process and not as absolute truth.
6. Awareness that persons and situations are rarely if ever two valued, that propositions do not have to be either "right" or "wrong" or "black" or "white".

According to Black, there are numerous semantic formulations but these six can be an alternative framework for semantic analysis of propaganda. This framework can be a guiding light for producers of propaganda, consumers of propaganda and builders of propaganda messages. Earlier, Korzybski's (1948) original work in *Science and Sanity; An Introduction to non-Aristotelian System and General Semantics* emphasizes that the Aristotelian concept of language or assumption about language has resulted in semantically inadequate or inappropriate behaviour which he described as "un-sane behaviour". General semantics provides avenue to communicator to rectify the language and human behaviour by being "sane" through awareness of language that; the symbol is not the thing symbolized, the map is not the territory and the word is not the thing (Hayakawa, 1978).

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