

2 Language and mass communication

Chapter 4 The language of persuasion

Objectives

By the end of this chapter you will be able to

- identify propaganda techniques
- define the characteristics of rhetoric and powerful speech writing
- understand how an advertisement works
- plan and conduct a part 2 further oral activity.

Persuasive language comes into all kinds of text, from brochures to speeches. Have you ever purchased something you did not really need? Have you ever been so moved by a speech that you got goosebumps? Your response may have been the result of persuasive language.

In this chapter you will be looking at three important applications of persuasive language. In Unit 4.1 you will focus on propaganda, in Unit 4.2 on powerful speeches and the use of rhetoric, and in Unit 4.3 on a form of persuasion that makes its way into our lives every day – advertising. At the end of the chapter you will study a sample part 2 further oral activity which makes good use of persuasive techniques.

Imagine if persuasive language had a recorded history. We would start with Aristotle and the ancient Greeks, whose ideas Cicero brought to Rome a few hundred years later. We would have to include religious figures such as Thomas Aquinas and scientists such as Charles Darwin, not to mention rulers and leaders such as Abraham Lincoln and Winston Churchill.

As we fast forward to modern times, we cannot overlook Edward (Eddie) Bernays, also known as ‘the father of public relations’. Although not a famous speaker, he may have done more to shape public opinion in America in the 20th century than any other person. He convinced Americans that eating sausages for breakfast was patriotic. He told them that Thomas Edison invented the light bulb. He helped overthrow the Guatemalan government in 1954 by staging a workers’ riot, filming it and disseminating it across the USA. As the nephew of psychologist Sigmund Freud, Bernays understood that if you could tap into people’s subconscious through the use of images and persuasive language, you could manipulate them.

An illustration of how Bernays changed the ideological landscape of America is his ‘Torches of Freedom’ campaign. Bernays told the press that the 1929 Easter Day parade in New York City would go down in history as a great day for women’s emancipation. The press was told to look out for ‘torches of freedom’ in the parade. On a cue from Bernays, his secretary and her friends, as they marched in the parade past press photographers, lit cigarettes and smoked them in public.



Figure 4.1 Edward (Eddie) Bernays (1891–1995), known as ‘the father of public relations’.

Further resources

To learn more about Eddie Bernays, watch the BBC documentary *The Century of the Self*. This fascinating documentary from 2002 reveals how one man changed the ideological landscape of America and the Western world through language and the media.



Figure 4.2 The Lucky Strike ad for the 'Torches of Freedom' campaign.

Key term

Propaganda is the conscious effort to shape public opinion to conform to an ideological position.

Up until 1929 it had been illegal for women to smoke in public in the USA. After that moment, however, it became widely accepted. Lucky Strike, the tobacco company which had hired Bernays as a public relations consultant, saw its potential market double almost overnight. Lucky Strike ran ads with pictures of women holding cigarettes and slogans saying: *An ancient prejudice has been removed. It's toasted*. Audiences recognised the *It's toasted* phrase from previous Lucky Strike ads, a phrase which originally referred to the method used to produce Lucky Strike cigarettes. Now, however, *It's toasted* stood for women's rights and emancipation and, thanks to the ad campaign, women began to feel confident about smoking in public: they felt equal to men.

In 1954 Eddie Bernays helped overthrow the government of Guatemala with a camera and a newspaper, so how much more possible would it be to do something similar today, in the age of the Internet? If Bernays could change women's rights through an advertising campaign, could we do more today to change how women are portrayed in the media? Bernays's 'Torches of Freedom' campaign provides lessons in media literacy for us today. In Chapter 3 you saw that media literacy is about identifying biased language and sensationalism. In this chapter you will continue to develop your media literacy skill by looking at the language of persuasion. You will be exploring how language has been used in recent years to influence public opinion.

Unit 4.1 Propaganda

The successes of Eddie Bernays are lessons in the power of **propaganda**. Propaganda is the conscious effort to shape public opinion towards a certain ideological position. Bernays's ideological position was one of capitalism and consumerism. During the First and Second World Wars he used propaganda to fight fascism, and in peacetime he used the same techniques to promote products and entire industries. During the Cold War his public relations firm fought communism.

In this unit we will look at how the words of another man, George W. Bush, were used to shape US public opinion. Propaganda is successful when it is used on an uninformed public. In other words, people are easily persuaded because they do not have counter-arguments to the information they are being given. It is necessary to make an active effort to identify and understand the techniques involved in propaganda. Living in a digital age does not always make this easier. In fact it requires an even stronger effort to stay aware and critical of persuasive language.

Seven propaganda techniques

Persuasion involves propagating convincing ideas, and part of becoming media literate includes being able to identify and label the common techniques used in propaganda. You will be looking at George W. Bush's 2003 State of the Union address and seeing these propaganda techniques in use.

Text 4.1 The State of the Union address, George W. Bush, January 2003

On 11th September 2001, three hijacked planes were flown into the World Trade Center in New York and the Pentagon in Washington DC. A fourth hijacked plane crashed into a field. Declaring a 'war against terrorism', President George W. Bush vowed to bring al-Qaeda, the terrorist organisation behind these attacks, to justice. The USA and NATO invaded Afghanistan and overthrew the Taliban government which had

protected al-Qaeda. In 2003 the war on terrorism was extended to Iraq, where there had been reports of weapons of mass destruction (WMDs), and in March 2003 the regime of Saddam Hussein in Iraq was overthrown. The following extract is an abridged extract from the State of the Union address by George W. Bush, given weeks before the invasion of Iraq.

Mr Speaker, Vice President Cheney, members of Congress, distinguished citizens and fellow citizens, every year, by law and by custom, we meet here to consider the state of the union. This year, we gather in this chamber deeply aware of decisive days that lie ahead.

You and I serve our country in a time of great consequence. During this session of Congress, we have the duty to reform domestic programs vital to our country, we have the opportunity to save millions of lives abroad from a terrible disease. We will work for a prosperity that is broadly shared, and we will answer every danger and every enemy that threatens the American people. In all these days of promise and days of reckoning, we can be confident.

In a whirlwind of change and hope and peril, our faith is sure, our resolve is firm, and our union is strong.¹

This country has many challenges. We will not deny, we will not ignore, we will not pass along our problems to other Congresses, to other presidents, and other generations.² We will confront them with focus and clarity and courage.

There are days when our fellow citizens do not hear news about the war on terror.³ There's never a day when I do not learn of another threat, or receive reports of operations in progress, or give an order in this global war against a scattered network of killers.⁴ The war goes on, and we are winning.

We've got the terrorists⁵ on the run. We're keeping them on the run. One by one the terrorists are learning the meaning of American justice.⁶

Our war against terror is a contest of will in which perseverance is power. In the ruins of two towers, at the western wall of the Pentagon, on a field in Pennsylvania, this nation made a pledge,⁷ and we renew that pledge tonight: Whatever the duration of this struggle, and whatever the difficulties, we will not permit the triumph of violence in the affairs of men; free people will set the course of history.

Today, the gravest danger in the war on terror, the gravest danger facing America and the world, is outlaw regimes that seek and possess nuclear, chemical and biological weapons. These regimes could use such weapons for blackmail, terror, and mass murder. They could also give or sell those weapons to terrorist allies, who would use them without the least hesitation.

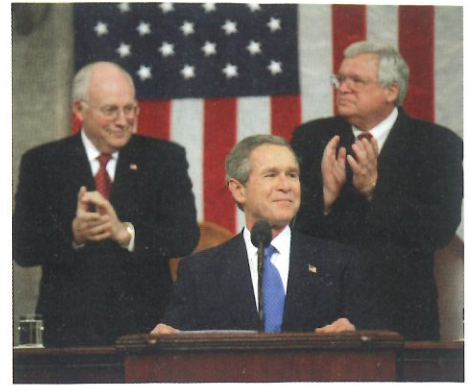


Figure 4.3 President George W. Bush delivering the State of the Union address in 2003.

discussion

One example of each propaganda technique has been provided. Can you find more examples of the seven propaganda techniques in Text 4.1?

1 Assertion

When George W. Bush declares *our union is strong*, there is no indication as to how such an assertion can be measured. Making bold statements is a common propaganda technique. The audience is not invited to question the validity of such statements as they are delivered with confidence and enthusiasm.

2 False dilemma

When politicians present false dilemmas, they essentially claim that there are only two answers to one problem. The string of logic that George W. Bush presents is simple and binary: Americans can on the one hand bring the battle to the enemy, or on the other they can deny the problem exists, ignore it or pass it on to future



TOK

The word *propaganda* may have negative associations because it often makes use of invalid arguments, or **argumentation fallacies**. As you may know from your TOK lessons, these are invalid strings of logic. How are the seven propaganda techniques in George W. Bush's 2003 State of the Union address different from the argumentation fallacies that you are studying in TOK? Do you think that propaganda also utilises valid logic? Explore Text 4.1 and look for both valid and invalid arguments.



Key terms

Stereotyping is the act of presenting a person or group in a certain way, through simplified and biased media.

Argumentation fallacies are common but invalid syllogisms, or in other words, poor strings of logic.

congresses. In essence Americans are being presented with two extremes and told to choose between the lesser of two evils. There is really no 'choice' involved in such statements, and the dilemma created is actually a false one.

3 Plain folks

The president is separating himself from the *fellow citizens*, who do not know as much about the war as him. He is making use of the 'plain folks' argument, a propaganda technique that generalises about the average person and groups the public together as plain folks. It is not surprising that the president knows more about national threats as he has powerful intelligence and security organisations working for him. Plain folks have no access to his sources of information and cannot know as much. Just like all of these propaganda techniques, the plain folks argument relies on an information gap, with the public being relatively uninformed.

4 Name-calling and pinpointing the enemy

George W. Bush refers to terrorists as a *network of killers*. Pinpointing the enemy is a common tactic used during wartime to stir up anger and manufacture consent. It gives the audience a very clear sense of right and wrong when the issues involved might be a lot less clear-cut than that.

5 Simplification

Simplifying a complicated situation is a common propaganda technique and is similar to name-calling and pinpointing. Simplification results in the formation of **stereotypical** images which are often distortions of the truth and which can lead to opinions that are based on prejudice. Many different groups have been referred to as terrorists, for example, and not just the organisations behind the 9/11 attacks. In another example of simplification, the groups are likely to refer to themselves as freedom fighters, even though this term covers a wide range of aims and ideals.

6 Glittering generalities

Phrases such as *American justice* are glittering generalities. These are words connected to worthy abstract concepts, such as freedom, democracy and justice, that would be difficult if not impossible to be against.

7 Card stacking

George W. Bush presents the case for war with facts. The series of events of 9/11 are presented as a strong reason to go to war. This method of propaganda is also known as card stacking, which is the act of selectively including arguments that support your cause while ignoring the counter-arguments.

Activity 4.1

The First World War changed not only the physical borders of the world but also the mental state of many people around the world. Many men went to fight with great enthusiasm, optimism and patriotism. For these men there was much at stake: national pride, family honour and friendships. Many went to fight in the belief that they would be 'home by Christmas'. Trench warfare, being exposed to poisonous gases and suffering from shell shock, caused thousands of troops from around the world to lose their early sense of innocence and hope.

- 1 Look at the propaganda posters (Figures 4.4–4.7) and discuss how they reflected and instigated sentiments of enthusiasm, optimism and patriotism.
- 2 How are the propaganda techniques discussed above used in each poster? More than one technique might be used in each example.



Figure 4.4 How does this British poster from 1915 persuade men to go to war?



Figure 4.5 Compare this Australian poster from 1915 with Figure 4.4.



Figure 4.6 How does this Canadian poster present a false dilemma?

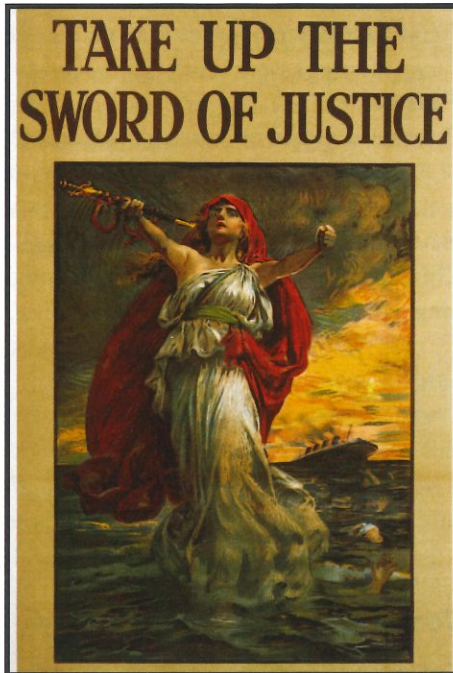


Figure 4.7 This British poster taps into the public outrage felt in 1915 after the RMS *Lusitania* was torpedoed. What propaganda techniques can you find in it?