

**UNDERSTANDING
PROPAGANDA
FROM A
GENERAL SEMANTICS
PERSPECTIVE**

CHARLES A. FLEMING*

ALTHOUGH THE EDITORS of *Propaganda Analysis*, the journal of the Institute of Propaganda Analysis, Inc., didn't cite Korzybski's work in their 1937 article that includes a list of "the seven common propaganda devices," (1) Korzybski and the Institute were talking about related matters. The Institute's seven propaganda devices (name calling, glittering generalities, transfer, testimonials, plain folks, card stacking, and band wagon) are classic examples of the violation of the principles of general semantics.

But, that stands to reason. As Neil Postman points out, "propaganda" refers to a use of language designed to evoke a particular kind of response. (2)

Korzybski and his associates intended that general semantics formulations and methods would help us communicate more clearly and immunize us against distorted communication. But propagandists exploit such techniques to influence thinking in whatever direction they want.

* Charles A. Fleming teaches in the School of Journalism and Broadcasting at Oklahoma State University, Stillwater.

Examining basic propaganda techniques in terms of the principles of general semantics makes it clear what propagandists are trying to do, and why their techniques work.

The "Big Six" Basic Principles of General Semantics

While Korzybski developed the basic formulations and terms, Wendell Johnson gave Korzybski's ideas a somewhat different structure and identified "three basic notions" as well as "three main principles." (3) The six fundamental ideas are:

- *Non-identity*. The word is not the thing.
- *Non-allness*. One can never know or say all about anything.
- *Self-reflexiveness*. People make abstractions of abstractions.
- *Probability principle*. Where everything changes, probability — not certainty — is the basic idea.
- *Symbol-signal reactions*. Symbol reactions involve thinking before reacting; signal reactions are stereotypical and automatic.
- *Extensionalization*. Extensionalization is the scientific method — questioning, observing, evaluating, and revising. It refers also to non-verbal definitions.

Propaganda's "Basic Seven" are the Abuse of General Semantics' "Basic Six"

The Institute of Propaganda Analysis' seven basic propaganda techniques are really the abuse or exploitation of the six basic ideas of general semantics.

NAME CALLING

Name Calling. Here the propagandist gives a negative label to whatever the propagandist wants others to view negatively. The propagandist wants reactions to the negative label,

not to evidence. An example would be to inappropriately label a group as "terrorists."

A General Semantics Interpretation

- *Non-identity.* The label "terrorist" evokes negative feelings, and the propagandist hopes the audience will respond the same way to the group. But the label is not the group.
- *Non-allness.* The name is not *all* there is to say about the group. The propagandist hopes the label "terrorist" is sufficient for the audience to form opinions without realizing there is more to be said about the group.
- *Self-reflexiveness.* The propagandist hopes the audience won't see the label "terrorist" as an abstraction of some behavior. But the label is an abstract, and as such is incomplete and inaccurate.
- *Probability principle.* Things change. Even if the name had some basis once, it may no longer fit. The propagandist hopes the audience will assume that if the label fit once, it always will be accurate.
- *Symbol-signal reaction.* The propagandist wants people to react automatically and negatively to the label "terrorist" without questioning the evidence.
- *Extensionalization.* Here the propagandist hopes the audience will not ask whether the terrorist label has any basis in fact, and will not seek non-verbal evidence.

GLITTERING GENERALITIES

Glittering Generalities. Propagandists use vague, abstract, positive terms — "virtue" words the institute called them — to win approval. They want reactions to the positive label, not to evidence. For example, a group might be called "patriotic" in hopes that people would react positively to that vague term and not to reality.

A General Semantics Interpretation

- *Non-identity.* The propagandist hopes the audience will respond favorably to the "patriotic" label and, assuming the label and the group are the same, respond similarly to the group. But, the label is not what it represents.
- *Non-allness.* The label does not say all about the group. The propagandist wants the audience to accept the "patriotic" label as sufficient description of the group, and not find out more.
- *Self-reflexiveness.* The "patriotic" label is an abstract of something, and the propagandist hopes the audience won't realize the label is personal, projective and incomplete, like all abstractions.
- *Probability principle.* Things change — even if the name was somewhat accurate once, it may not be so now, nor tomorrow. The propagandist wants the audience to assume that whatever fit once will always be so.
- *Symbol-signal reaction.* Here the propagandist hopes people will automatically and favorably react to the label without thinking about what it represents and without checking non-verbal facts.
- *Extensionalization.* The propagandist does not want the audience to ask "what do you mean by 'patriotic' in this situation?" The propagandist does not want the audience to look for the non-verbal reality.

TRANSFER

Transfer. The "transfer" device carries positive qualities of someone or something over to whatever the propagandist is promoting. For example, using the American flag as part of an organization's logo would tend to transfer positive attitudes toward the flag to the organization.

A General Semantics Interpretation

- *Non-identity.* The two things (flag and organization) are not the same, but the propagandist wants the audience to see them as similar. The propagandist wants feelings toward one transferred to the other because of the connection the propagandist has made.
- *Non-allness.* The flag as part of the logo is not all there is to know about the organization. The propagandist wants the audience to take the flag's presence as sufficient evidence of the organization's worth, and not seek more information.
- *Self-reflexiveness.* The propagandist hopes the audience will respond to the apparent connection between the flag and the organization, and not examine the non-verbal facts to see if the organization deserves approval. But this connection (the basis for transfer) is an abstraction of all there is to know about the organization.
- *Probability principle.* Even if at one time there was a reason for connecting the flag to the organization, it is not necessarily so now. The propagandist wants the audience to assume whatever basis there might have been for a connection between the two, continues.
- *Symbol-signal reaction.* The propagandist wants people to react automatically to the flag-organization connection and not to the non-verbal facts about what the organization does, or whether it deserves to be associated with the flag.
- *Extensionalization.* The propagandist doesn't want the audience to question whether the relationship has any basis in fact or ask if the organization deserves the same feelings people have toward the flag.

TESTIMONIAL

Testimonial. Testimonials by persons who are credible to the audience help propagandists promote their causes. Similarly, counter-testimonials can help destroy what the propagandist is against. As an example, positive statements from users of a particular product would tend to influence purchase of the product.

A General Semantics Interpretation

- *Non-identity.* The propagandist wants the audience to respond favorably to the testimonials without realizing that the experiences of those giving the testimonials aren't the same as those the audience may have. No two experiences are exactly the same.
- *Non-allness.* The testimonials aren't all that can be said about the subject. There's more information needed to make intelligent decisions, but the propagandist hopes the audience won't seek information beyond the testimonials.
- *Self-reflexiveness.* Each testimonial is one person's personal, incomplete abstraction of experience with the product. But the propagandist wants the audience to respond to the testimonials without realizing their abstract nature.
- *Probability principle.* The propagandist would like the audience to think things never change. If at one time the testimonials were accurate representations of experiences with the product, they may not be now.
- *Symbol-signal reaction.* The propagandist wants an automatic, unthinking response to the testimonials as if they were sufficient evidence of product qualities and are all that is needed to make a sound decision.
- *Extensionalization.* The propagandist wants the audience to make decisions based on the testimonials themselves — on words alone — not on non-verbal evidence.

PLAIN FOLKS

Plain Folks. The "plain folks" device is used to win acceptance by presenting someone as being like the persons in the audience. An example would be a politician shown mowing the lawn or taking the family out to dinner.

A General Semantics Interpretation

- *Non-identity.* While there may be similarities, the politician and the audience aren't the same. The politician's experiences as shown to the audience may not accurately resemble what the politician normally does. The similarities don't add up to the actual person, but the propagandist wants the audience to react to the similarities without realizing there may be important differences.
- *Non-allness.* The things the politician does that fit the "plain folks" description aren't the whole story. They're incomplete and the propagandist may not want audience members to learn more about the politician.
- *Self-reflexiveness.* What has been said about the politician is someone's personal, incomplete abstraction of what the politician is like and what he or she does. The propagandist wants the audience to think the "plain folks" abstraction is an objective picture of the politician.
- *Probability principle.* The propagandist wants the audience to assume that whatever was so once will always be that way. If at one time the politician did the things shown, they may no longer be representative acts.
- *Symbol-signal reaction.* Here the propagandist hopes people will react automatically to similarities between the politician and the audience without thinking, and without looking for evidence regarding how the politician actually behaves.
- *Extensionalization.* The propagandist wants the audience to make decisions based on the "plain folks" similarity

and not seek non-verbal evidence of the politician's similarity, and of what he or she is really like.

CARD STACKING

Card Stacking. "Card stacking" occurs when the propagandist selects and omits facts, distorts information, under- and over-emphasizes, confuses, and uses every deceptive device available to "stack the cards" against the truth. An example would be to withhold negative information about an incident while making only positive aspects public.

A General Semantics Interpretation

- *Non-identity.* The argument for a point of view is not necessarily an accurate or complete argument, nor is it the thing it represents. It is not the same as the whole body of facts available. But the propagandist wants the audience to respond to the "facts" presented without questioning them.
- *Non-allness.* The propagandist hopes the audience won't realize that the propagandist's argument is not the whole story, not the fully accurate story, and that much has been left out on purpose.
- *Self-reflexiveness.* The argument has been "selected" from all available facts about the subject. This selection on the part of the propagandist is personal and incomplete, but the audience is expected to assume that what they have been presented is the full, objective story.
- *Probability principle.* The propagandist hopes here that people won't realize things change. Even if some elements of the argument seemed appropriate once, they are not necessarily so now.
- *Symbol-signal reaction.* The propagandist doesn't want the audience to do any thinking before they act, but hopes they'll respond automatically to the information presented.

- *Extensionalization.* The propagandist wants people to respond to his or her argument, not to nonverbal evidence. The propagandist doesn't want the audience to know what has been left out, distorted, or fabricated.

BAND WAGON

Band Wagon. This is a "follow the crowd" device that promotes the idea that everyone else is doing what the propagandist wants the audience to do. It is more comfortable to be a member of the crowd than it is to stand out or to be left out. An example would be an appeal to vote for a particular candidate because everyone else like you is voting for that candidate.

A General Semantics Interpretation

- *Non-identity.* Audience members are not the same as other people in the "crowd." Experiences, motivation, and concerns differ. But the propagandist hopes the audience will respond to the apparent similarities with others and ignore important differences.
- *Non-allness.* Even though others like those in the audience support this candidate, this should not be the whole case for or against giving one's support. But the propagandist wants people to respond without asking questions or realizing there is much more to be considered.
- *Self-reflexiveness.* What the "crowd" and audience members have in common is someone's biased, incomplete abstraction of all similarities and differences. The propagandist hopes the audience will respond to the "similarity" abstraction as if it were a complete, objective picture of the case in support of the politician.
- *Probability principle.* At one time persons similar to the audience members may have supported this candidate, but it may not be so anymore. The propagandist wants

people to believe that what was so once will always be that way.

- *Symbol-signal reaction.* The propagandist wants the audience to react automatically to the "community" idea, the need to be part of the group, without thinking about whether this is best for them, whether it is still that way, and what has not been said.
- *Extensionalization.* The audience must look for other evidence of the candidate's worthiness instead of making a choice based solely on what others do, as the propagandists desire.

CONCLUSION

The seven basic propaganda techniques are convenient ways of labeling the exploitation of general semantics principles. We can understand better what propaganda is and how and why it works through examining it from a general semantics perspective.

NOTES AND REFERENCES

1. "How To Detect Propaganda," *Propaganda Analysis*, 1: 1-4
2. Neil Postman, *Crazy Talk, Stupid Talk*. New York: Delacorte Press, 1976.
3. Wendell Johnson, *People in Quandaries: The Semantics of Personal Adjustment*. New York: Harper & Row, 1946. Paperback edition: Concord, CA: International Society for General Semantics.