DEFINING PROPAGANDA

Zev Bar-Lev

San Diego State University - USA

Zev bar-Lev is professor (emeritus) in the Department of Linguistics and Middle-Eastern/Asian Languages of San Diego State University, where he has taught since 1979. His teaching interests and research (evidenced in some 60 articles published) include: Semantics and Discourse (including "key-consonant theory" and Critical Discourse Analysis); Syntax and Morphology, especially of Hebrew; methods of teaching of foreign languages (especially with his "Sheltered Initiation Language Learning" applied to Hebrew and 40 other languages, including English).

Arzán Santaella's (2009) "How Words Go to War: Doublespeak and the War in Iraq" presents an analysis of the "warspeak", or "propagandistic language" of the Bush administration in arguing for the war in Iraq. Using a critique of his article, the present article will attempt to outline a practical analytic definition of propaganda (i.e., criteria for identifying propaganda).

Using as starting point Sheryl Tuttle Ross's (2002) definition and analysis of *propaganda,* Arzán Santaella's article is an interesting and developed example of a general method of analysis which, in Europe, is called "Critical Discourse Analysis" (CDA); in the US, it is considered a branch of cognitive linguistics, most famously represented by George Lakoff (2004) when he addressed the Democrat presidential convention. Characteristically, this method allows not only introducing relevant resources of linguistic analysis (including semantics and pragmatics), but also admits the inclusion of subjective concepts, such as might be covered by the broad philosophical concept of "values". Incorporation of

values as a legitimate part of scholarly analysis has its dangers, of course, and yet any consideration of political discourse surely cannot ignore values as a part of content.

Let me note, to begin, that Arzán Santaella goes beyond Ross in a crucial way. Perhaps because his focus and approach are linguistic (as opposed to Ross's artistic focus), he makes important steps towards a discourse-oriented definition of propaganda, and, equally important, partly displaces Ross's reliance on "epistemic defectiveness". Broadening out the definition in this way is important. As Ross herself hints, the falsity of a message vis-à-vis reality is not the crucial point to proving that a discourse is propaganda; for our purposes, it also enhances the linguistic nature of an appropriate definition of propaganda.

It remains to be seen whether or not this sort of analysis of political discourse can achieve and retain academic integrity. But we must at least note the innovation that academic integrity must not be equated with impartiality or the absence of subjectivity, as might once have been assumed. Thus, however complex a definition of "propaganda" must be, a partisan character is not a prerequisite to identifying it. After all, must one be impartial about racism in order to identify racist propaganda, or indifferent to war in order to identity *warspeak*? Hopefully not, because impartiality toward racism and indifference to war are not qualities that we wish to encourage, in scholars or anyone else.

The present article is part of a larger, longer standing attempt on my part to distinguish two kinds of political discourse: "propaganda", in much the sense of Ross's article, vs. a non-propaganda form of discourse, which we might call "academic" discourse. My neutral or "descriptive" stance may distinguish me from Arzán Santaella, and perhaps from Ross as well. But as Ross notes, the term *propaganda* was first used by Pope Gregory XV in 1622 with positive connotation, to refer to persuasion of the truths of the Church; in the USSR it was also used (e.g., in *agitprop* for "agitation and propagation", the popular-educational goal of the Communist Party) with positive connotation, as persuasion for societal benefit.

This is not to imply that propaganda should be regarded as highly as academic discourse. My position is that propaganda is a form of advertising or cheer-leading, legitimate *in this role,* at least to the extent that it stops short of actual deceit or fraud, but not required to aspire to over-all accuracy or full disclosure - as opposed to academic discourse, which presumably does (or should) aspire to this higher level of truthfulness. Thus, I do not consider it inherently illegitimate to want to "sell" - whether an automobile or a political policy, nor even to "puff" one's point of view to do so. Full disclosure of defects seems generally not to be morally required in such contexts. Academic discourse can (and often does) attempt to persuade no less than propaganda (a fact which might be confusing in Ross's framework), but it does so (or should do so) in a more restricted way, inviting full, rational deliberation (which both Ross and Arzán Santaella note as lacking in propaganda) along the way.

I sense that Arzán Santaella's stance towards propaganda is less neutral, if not hostile, since he is criticizing the Bush administration for what he clearly believes to be a wrong and unjustified war, and the rhetoric used to support it. Of course Arzán Santaella is very far from the first scholar, teacher, or student to write or speak on this topic, and likely not the last. I have personally encountered numbers of teachers of rhetoric and writing who develop similar positions in class; and two classic articles are discussed in Bar-Lev (2007a).

As Arzán Santaella appropriately notes, *warspeak* as a variety of propaganda will "exploit what the public wants to hear"; the language is "set to be "simple, repetitious, and emotionally charged". Part of the process is utilization of the assumption that "all guilt falls on the enemy" for "forcing upon us" the decision to make war. Ultimately, the whole communication must fit into the appropriate "framing," i.e., the right set of assumptions. I will assume that it is obvious how Arzán Santaella applies these concepts to the Bush administration's "ramping up" of the US public to the Iraq War by focusing upon the "dangers"

284

that it presented as coming from deliberately grouped "enemies" that included both the Taliban in Afghanistan and Saddam Hussein's regime in Iraq.

Included in Arzán Santaella's analysis is not only the Bush administration's delimitation of an enemy, grouped and defined in accord with Bush's apparent world-view, but also an implicit audience, which is assumed to be unified behind the authors' goals — although this assumption itself may be manipulative. Those in the actual audience who do not already agree, the propagandists may hope, will be brought aboard not so much by specific academic argument, as by an infectious groupthink. In any case, persuasion does not proceed by rational deliberation in their discourse, but rather, in part at least, by "a wink and a nod" of phatic communion (and presupposed agreement) to the audience - or at least that part of the audience that already agrees with the stance presented.

The article under consideration contributes to my goal of defining propaganda by hinting at some of the dimensions of analysis that must ultimately be pinned down, as well as by itself bumping up against the problems involved in any attempt to do so. Most notably, the article implicitly notes that it is not enough to claim that propaganda is definable by its exaggerations of reality, because (quoting Ross) "the propagandist can and usually does believe the view that s/he expounds". Actually, our author goes on immediately to take a narrower view, namely that the Bush administration was motivated by the belief that "there are higher issues so paramount that strict adherence to the literal truth is not mandatory". We will again note this shift below.

Our author includes as symptoms of propaganda "ignoring counter evidence" and "fallacious reasoning" as "types of thinking that are epistemically defective". Thus, *"warspeak* is conducted to function independently of rational debate or careful deliberation. It does not pass the test of reliable evidence", which should show "enough evidence to support the justification for action". The data must be

"representative," i.e., "not an exception or extreme case". The facts must be "accurate and current" as well as "relevant to the claims being made".

But one analytic problem to be faced is how to detect and evaluate epistemic defectiveness. To simply compare the discourse to the reality it purports to describe allows our own subjectivity to gallop in unfettered. Such laxness would be especially unfortunate when we are linguists: How do we put ourselves above the authors we criticize in evaluating reality *per se*? Our specialized training and talent relates to the ability to analyze language, not reality, political or other. At the very least, we might feel ourselves in need of some expertise in Political Science.

What kind of evidence is required to announce reliably that George W. Bush or anyone else did, or did not, use propaganda? The scale of possibilities implicitly referred to in Arzán Santaella's article includes the ideas that propaganda: (1a) presents a deliberately falsified view of reality, and/or (1b) uses fallacious reasoning; or at least (2) presents a false view, albeit one based on the sincerely-held world-view of the people presenting it; or at least (3) presents insufficient evidence to justify the given program; and/or (4) makes use of "emotionally charged" language.

I have listed these different types of "epistemic defectiveness" here in a tentative hierarchy: The lower numbers name the more serious defects, although they are also simply different from each other in inherent structure. Thus, a discourse whose only feature of propaganda was of type (4) might be analyzed as sincere but over-exuberant, a legitimately reasoned academic discourse in need of an extensive lexical revision. More generally, this hierarchy in turn gives us the sort of practical analytic definition of propaganda that we are looking for, an epistemology of propaganda. The hierarchy is intended only to be suggestive, not complete; for example, it makes no method of 'demonization of opponents,' a common feature of propagandistic language, which Arzán Santaella doesn't happen to refer to.

Type (4) is the easiest for linguists to demonstrate, within the background provided by our professional training and background. We are uniquely able to isolate emotionally charged or 'loaded expressions,' i.e., expressions that have more connotation than denotation. We are further able to distinguish between "loaded" expressions which are by their nature emotionally charged (4a), such as "war-monger," and terms which have specific denotative meaning, but can be used (via exaggeration) to achieve emotional appeal, such as "communist" (4b). "War-monger" does have its denotative element. One is unlikely to use this epithet to criticize a pacifist. But because of its heavy negative connotation no one is likely to label himself as a war-monger, whereas one might well call oneself a communist, if this term in fact characterized one's ideology. These are random examples, not the subject of Arzán Santaella's article.

On the basis of this distinction, we can note that Arzán Santaella's arguments using type (4) happen to all use sub-type (4b). But the problem with this subtype is that it requires knowledge of, and evidence, from the real world, namely the sort of evidence best analyzed in Political Science. If A calls B a "communist," it is not enough for us to observe this epithet in A's discourse, in order for us to accuse A of propaganda (much less of deceit going beyond the proper bounds of propaganda), until we can independently determine whether B is *in fact* a communist. What are *in fact* the criteria for being a communist? Does one have to call oneself a communist? Presumably not. It is possible to be a communist without using the epithet about oneself, as long as one in fact holds to communist ideology. Does one have to believe in violent revolution with the immediate goal of the abolition of all salary discrimination, and indeed the abolition of all currency, as Marx envisioned? On the latter question, presumably not, since no "communist country", starting with the USSR has ever gone beyond salaries determined by the state. On the former, too, communism exists in many modern non-violent variants. A definition of "communist" can fairly be based on the ideologies that people who call themselves communist in fact

propound. Obviously these are all complicated questions — not easily solved by a linguist alone (although we do have some special insights into the nature of definition that would be helpful).

Type (1) accusations involve the greatest difficulty for academic discourse, because they require specific knowledge of the inner cognitive state of the person being analyzed. Thus, Lakoff (2004) purposefully backs off from any claim that George Bush actually "lied" about WMDs, precisely because, as Lakoff notes, "lying" implies a *knowledge of the falsity* of the view that one is presenting, and an *intent to deceive* the audience into believing this false view. If Bush had been aware of the absence of WMDs, he would hardly have highlighted this claim, which would likely be revealed all too soon. Propaganda, in Ross's view too, clearly does not require the presence of "lying" in this specific sense.

Many of those accusing Bush of lying would not back away from such psychoanalytic claims; nor, presumably, would Howard Dean, in his comment that "the difference between us [Democrats] and Republicans is that we don't *want* children to go to bed hungry" (emphasis mine; this quote from a frequently replayed oral clip of which an equivalent is quoted in the Seattle Times, Sunday June 12, 2005). Note again that I am not trying to insert covert claims. My goal is to distinguish between propaganda and academic discourse. I do suggest that accusing George W. Bush of "lying" (and accusing Republicans of wanting children to go to bed hungry) must be classified as propaganda, rather than academic discourse. And once again, I am not saying such discourse is illegitimate, but only that it belongs to the "advertising wing" of its point of view, the sort of discourse that would presumably be less appropriate, and therefore more open to criticism, in an academic journal.

Arzán Santaella's arguments are mostly focused on accusations of type (2). He sidesteps type (1a) early on, although not denying its applicability, and actually hinting at it along the way, in the shift already noted. In fact, his main citation is an article called "Bush Uranium *Lie* Is Tip of the Iceberg" (my emphasis).

But he does accuse Bush of using type (1b), fallacious reasoning, namely of using the "false dilemma" or either-or fallacy, (1) in the supposed choice between war in Iraq and allowing terrorists to attack us within the US; and (2) in the famous "for us or against us" rhetorical trope. It is tempting for a linguist to want to find logical fallacies of this type, since they seem so easy to isolate on linguistic grounds.

Unfortunately, in ordinary discourse, identifying fallacies may not be such a simple matter. The Law of the Excluded Middle (*tertium non datur*) is a logical trope, not a logical fallacy. Many logical fallacies are in a similar way mere misuses of logical principles. The question is then, again, as much an empirical matter, i.e., a matter of political analysis, rather than a matter of simply identifying a syntactic structure. Obviously reality is complex. It is probably possible to envisage many cases of "A and not-A." In any case, the Bush administration would hardly have argued that the war in Iraq would render homeland security superfluous, as a strictly literal reading of the either-or trope named might be taken to imply.

But let us back up for a moment. Am I saying that the either-or trope is legitimate (as the Law of the Excluded Middle) in academic discourse (as well as propaganda)? Obviously, that depends. Does it apply to the real world in a given case? This is not a logical question, but an empirical question: How it applies to the War on Terrorism is obviously not going to be a narrow linguistic question. So again, Arzán Santaella is accusing Bush of propaganda with an analysis that partly depends on questions of Political Science.

The article also contains an implicit focus on type (3), i.e., taking positions for which there is insufficient evidence, especially in the discussion of the presence vs. absence of WMDs. In sum, much of the article consists of citations of well-known positions of the Bush administration, given as proof *in themselves* of Bush's Iraq policy, as examples of types (2-3).

289

But arguments of types (2-3) again require an analysis of the underlying reality, and therefore blur the distinction between Critical Discourse Analysis (and linguistics generally) and Political Science. Here linguists are on shakier ground making claims, since they do not ordinarily have the training and background of political scientists. For example, how would Arzán Santaella answer Stephen Hayes' (2004) claim that Iraq was intimately involved with al-Qaeda well before 9/11? He might claim that Hayes fails to prove the actual involvement of Saddam's Iraq in 9/11. The same claim might also be directed at the Taliban in Afghanistan — or almost anyone else, other than the actual perpetrators of 9/11, who were all killed in the attacks themselves, so that no one, or almost no one, is left to punish for 9/11. In World War II, similarly, the US attacked Nazi Germany without a prior German *attack:* The argument at the time presumably assumed the grouping (by the US administration) of Nazi Germany with Japan.

Note that I am not inserting any covert claims about what should or should not have been done in response to 9/11, nor even whether Iraq was or was not sufficiently involved with al-Qaeda to be considered part of any "axis of terror". I am only making the point that facing such questions directly requires involvement in issues of Political Science that linguists are not specially equipped to handle. Arzán Santaella's article does not contain much careful analysis of political realities. In fact, it contains little in the form of direct quotes from the Bush administration, so it seems to be located in the twilight between political science and linguistics.

How then is Arzán Santaella's article itself to be correctly classified? The article does avoid use of "emotionally charged" language (at least subtype 4a) directly aimed against the Bush administration, e.g., avoiding calling Bush a "liar," at least directly. But it does use emotionally charged language in attribution of ideas to the Bush administration, for example in attributing to them the view that "military and civil casualties are ultimately a good thing for the Iraqi people". This is emotionally charged language, attributed without citation to the Bush administration, which clearly involves a form of implicit

psychoanalysis. It is doubtful that anyone human would agree to this characterization of their position, any more than agreeing to an obviously loaded epithet like "war-monger".

Of course, factually, any administration that goes to war accepts the possibility of civilian as well as military deaths; and some would level a charge of war-criminal against any such president (as Jon Stewart did, briefly, against Truman for dropping the A-bomb on Japan, 4/29/09; various clips can be easily googled). However, pacifism is not the official policy of CDA or cognitive linguistics; nor, indeed, of Political Science, in which discussion of "just war theory" is a well-established topic for research and discussion.

Indeed, one would hope that propaganda might be described, linguistically, in terms independent of the specific cause for which it is used, at least if my neutral, "descriptive" approach is correct. Theoretically, we ought to be able to envisage academic discourse (as well as propaganda) arguing for war in some given situation (one widely accepted example would be the response to the attack on Pearl Harbor), as well as the possibility of propaganda in the service of peace or any other political goal, e.g., abolition of the Electoral College, a stimulus or bail-out program, or even health care reform. Whether a given discourse is propaganda or academic discourse depends not on the topic, but on the quality and nature of the discourse. For example, propaganda for health care reform might use loaded terms for opponents, ignore counter arguments, or even make use of the either-or fallacy, as effective tools of persuasion. Note that I am here avoiding (as throughout) any idea that academic discourse should not espouse specific political causes, but only advising that they do so with more of a goal of enlightening than persuading.

While Arzán Santaella's article (partly) sidesteps (1), it is argued on the basis of arguments of types (2-3) and (4b), which all depend on analysis in Political Science. And yet there is almost no direct discussion of issues of Political Science, such as those raised by Hayes; nor any direct discussion of views

and analyses alternative to those of the article itself. There is no discussion of whether Saddam Hussein *in fact* posed an actual "danger" even without WMDs, for example, if he was able to bribe recipients of payments under Iraqi oil programs to lift all sanctions, and later resume research on WMDs.

In short, Arzán Santaella has presented only one side of the argument, ignoring possible counter arguments, such as have been readily available in dissenting media. Further, one might wish to see a more insightful analysis of the arguments for attacking Iraq than the old saw that it was based entirely on WMDs, where in fact at least five distinct major points were made, both in and around Colin Powell's famous presentation at the UN.

One actual logical fallacy is Arzán Santaella's claim that Sudan was capriciously excluded from the US War on Terror. Sudan's terror was directed at its own people, not the US, where the War on Terror was (as the article notes) aimed at protecting the US, not ridding the world of all evil. Note that I am here identifying an internal self-contradiction in the article, not making assumptions about Sudan.

Presumably Arzán Santaella can permit himself to present only one side of the argument because he knows his audience. Members of the academic community have been overwhelmingly arrayed against the Iraq War, so he can safely write from within the "framing" of that rather unified group without fear of much dissent.

Similarly, I do not expect to see many scholarly analyses of the discourse of the Obama administration in favor of health care reform, with its frequent use of the either-or fallacy, as well as other clear symptoms of propaganda — interesting as this topic ought to be (whatever its conclusions) for the study of political discourse. Thus, President Obama, as well as, even more propagandistically, Representative Alan Grayson, D-Florida (see http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-usmvYOPfco), have referred to the supposed absence of conservative proposals for health care reform, implying that the choice is between the "Democrat program" (whatever that is, since it exists only in the minds of

individual Democrats and a variety of bills-in-progress that must yet be completely written, then combined) and the supposed belief in the status quo of opponents. But this is a false either-or claim. In fact, conservative proposals for health care are printed at least weekly in such newspapers as the Wall Street Journal and Investors Business Daily (see for a further example Bobby Jindal's "The Conservative Case for Reform" in the Washington Post, October 5, 2009), and they are expressed in a number of amendments that are routinely rejected by the Democrat majorities in Congress. They include proposals such as tort reform (e.g., caps on malpractice penalties), breaking down barriers between states (so that people can take advantage of policies available in states other than their own), legal restrictions on dropping of insurees, and other proposals that could individually handle every one of the individual problems of current health care and insurance. It is possible, even in the most academic discourse, to observe that the conservatives' proposals attack the problems piecemeal, whereas the Democrats' proposals attempt a complete overhaul or radical transformation of the whole health care "system". But characterizing a piecemeal approach as "no proposals" is exaggerated to the point of logical fallacy, no matter how sincerely believed.

Note that I am not arguing for the position I rejected from the beginning, namely that scholars should aspire to impartiality. But I agree with Arzán Santaella's larger point that propaganda can be avoided, in the appropriate contexts, by full consideration of both sides of any argument. This was my argument in bar-Lev 2007a and b. Unfortunately, I do not believe that Arzán Santaella has himself achieved this goal in his article. Further, for Arzán Santaella to complain about propaganda in politics would seem to be more than the proverbial "pot calling the kettle black". While academic discourse, with the full consideration of alternative hypotheses and views, is the job of scholars, the formulation and execution of policy is the primary job of presidents, and propaganda is a useful tool of persuasion, as part of the execution of policy, for President Obama no less than for President Bush. Using supposed

"identification of propaganda" in a prescriptive way is, I cannot help thinking, a covert (and illegitimate) way to try to influence policy.

In their frequent rush to prove the bias of the other side (while ignoring their own bias), I do also think that discourse analysts are missing another important opportunity: analyzing bias in the media itself. The way that different perspectives are reflected in different headlines, op-ed pieces, and even news articles, is surely worth far more attention than it gets — and has the advantage of not forcing linguists to tread into areas in which their emotions may (however understandably) exceed their analytic ability. The present political scene in the US is an astoundingly rich area for such an investigation, with its unprecedented political divide — and the unprecedented partisanship of media.

References

Arzán Santaella, Angel (2009). "How Words Go to War: Doublespeak and the War in Iraq." *Glossa,* 4:2.

Bar-Lev, Zev (2007a). "Mrs. Goldberg's Rebuttal of Butt et al." *Discourse and Society*, 18:2.

Bar-Lev, Zev (2007b). "Reframing *Moral Politics*." *Language and Politics,* 6:3.

Hayes, Stephen (2004). *The Connection: How al Qaeda's Cooperation with Saddam Hussein Has Endangered America. NY*: HarperCollins.

Lakoff, George (2004). *Don't Think of an Elephant*, White River Junction VT: Chelsea Green Publ.

Ross, Sheryl Tuttle (2002), "Understanding Propaganda: The Epistemic Merit Model and Its Application to Art." *Journal of Aesthetic Education,* 36:1.