A Means to an End: Using Propaganda Rhetoric for Pedagogical Development

When it ended, the twentieth century left behind two world wars and the Cold War. In addition to these periods of conflict, the twentieth century contained numerous groups and individuals using propaganda as a means for control and to promote war. Adolf Hitler, in his book *Mein Kampf*, describes in an entire section how to effectively use propaganda; Joseph Goebbels, the Nazi Minister of Public Enlightenment and Propaganda and close associate to Hitler, also made an exhaustive list detailing how an individual might effectively utilize propaganda to influence a population (Doob 192). The United States and the Soviet Union’s governments both used propaganda as well, when each nation competed with the other during the Cold War. Indeed, one can look to the war-fraught twentieth century for more obvious instances of propaganda than almost any other period in human history. War has also bled onto the twenty-first century, and so too has propaganda usage, and although propaganda usage can be argued as an action that is not inherently immoral, propagandists’ motives are oftentimes lacking in moral integrity. Because of the ambiguous nature of propaganda usage, this paper examines the rhetorical strategies propagandists use for the purpose of persuading educators to develop pedagogical strategies that teach students how to discern for themselves propaganda usage in a contemporary setting. This rhetorical analysis makes apparent the methodologies propagandists use so that any informed student may analyze and repudiate any propagandistic tactics. Before this discussion begins, however, this paper will briefly focus on the ambiguity of propaganda usage to establish a contextual basis for this rhetorical analysis.

Scholar and social psychologist Leonard Doob researched propaganda throughout his
academic career and examined the connotations the word *propaganda* brought about in a general population. Doob found that propaganda perception is not an objective action; the mores of different audiences dictate the manner in which these audiences perceive propaganda (Koch 516). In an article titled “Psychology and Propaganda,” Doob, as well as scholar Edward Robinson, define propaganda as “the employment of non-logical, or affective, appeals in the public dissemination of and modification of ideas, attitudes, and beliefs” (88). Doob and Robinson argue that war-time uses of propaganda resulted in the negative connotations associated with propaganda. The two scholars also posit that propaganda usage is not an inherently immoral act; a propagandist’s motives are what determines whether or not propaganda, as it occurs within a specific context, is an immoral act. Doob and Robinson conclude by stating that propaganda should be viewed in an objective manner, whereas the propagandist should be subjectively scrutinized (93). Therefore, an educator instructing students on how to discern propaganda would find focusing on the propagandist first an effective point of initiation into propaganda analysis. For that purpose, this paper will now focus on how propagandists use ethos.

*The Encyclopedia of Rhetoric and Composition* defines the word *ethos* as “[persuasion] through the character of the speaker” (Enos 243). Placed within the context of an individual or organization attempting to influence a group of people, one can assume that ethos has an important impact on whether or not propagandists will be successful in their endeavors. Roger Cherry, professor of rhetoric and composition at Ohio State University, distinguishes between ethos and persona in his article “Ethos Versus Persona: Self-Representation in Written Discourse,” and details how an individual might use ethos: “Ethos refers to the need for rhetors to portray themselves in their speeches [in a certain manner] in order to achieve credibility and
thereby secure persuasion” (386). Cherry also analyzes the three components of ethos and how these three components allow one to effectively employ ethos: *pronesia*, *arête*, and *eunoia*, or practical wisdom, good moral character, and goodwill toward the audience respectively (386). These three ethos components are integral elements of a propagandist’s attempt to influence a specific audience. To illustrate how instructors might educate students on how these three components work in tandem, this paper will analyze a representative passage of Hitler’s discourse to demonstrate how he used the three ethos components.

The following quote is a section taken from a speech Hitler gave to Germany’s general population on 12 March 1933¹ as a response to the Nazi party taking control of the central government:

Thanks to the insight we have now gained into the doings of [the Communist party], we will nevertheless eliminate them within [the shortest amount of time].
And I wish to couple my command that the purity and thus the honor of our national uprising be protected with my thanks to you for the overwhelming loyalty, discipline and sacrifices which you have demonstrated and made until now. In a few short weeks, mainly by virtue of your efforts and your work, one of the greatest upheavals Germany has ever known has taken place…My party comrades! Long live the National Revolution, long live our dearly beloved German Volk and our proud German Reich! (Domarus 266)

This passage demonstrates Hitler’s use of all three ethos components: *pronesia* is found at the beginning of the section, since Hitler is addressing the entire country—“Thanks to the insight we

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¹ This particular translation of the original German text can be found within volume one of *Hitler, Speeches and Proclamations, 1932-1945: The Chronicle of a Dictatorship*, a compilation of speeches and other biographical information about Hitler’s life. See Works Cited page.
have now gained”—he states that the whole country has the cleverness—the wisdom—to see past the guile of the Communist party; to meet arête, Hitler intersperses words such as purity and honor throughout his speech to create a credible moral character; and the entire passage utilizes eunoia, since Hitler employs appealing descriptions of his party’s struggle and triumph to promote goodwill toward his audience. This passage is just one example. Hitler makes a recurrent use of ethos in almost all of his spoken and written discourses, and since Hitler brought Germany out of a particularly harsh economic recession, one can argue that he was able to effectively use ethos.

Through this use of ethos—the manner in which a propagandist presents himself or herself—an instructor can inform his or her students on how to discern propagandists. Learning how propagandists present themselves allows one to see when he or she is being influenced by an outside force (e.g., a seemingly good-natured politician using equivocal language, usually in pursuit of an ulterior motive). Ethos is not the only rhetorical strategy propagandists use; an instructor teaching his or her students a methodology to question the tactics of propagandists should be attentive to other rhetorical practices a propagandist might employ. For that purpose, this paper will now focus on the semantics of propaganda and how these semantics assist propagandists.

Semantics—the study of words and their changing meanings and effects upon a reader/listener (Enos 665)—plays an important role in the generation of propaganda. An individual’s message and how he or she presents it contributes to the effectiveness of the persuasive elements in that message. Scholar and philosopher Alfred Korzybski studied semantics and developed a theory he termed general semantics (not to be confused with the word

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2 Hitler also committed horrible actions, but his utilization of ethos allowed him to do so.
*semantics* and what it connotes and denotes) that allows one to appraise human responses to signals and signifiers (Hayakawa 205). Korzybski’s general semantics is also a system of processes that can be applied within other contexts, which allowed Wendell Johnson, a psychologist and fellow scholar of semantics, to apply Korzybski’s work within a communicative context; the verbal and written exchanges comprising a society (Fleming 4). Johnson also enumerated Korzybski’s general semantics, which in turned allowed scholar Charles Fleming to apply general semantics into a propaganda studies context in his own article, “Understanding Propaganda from a General Semantics Perspective.”

The bifurcated organization of Fleming’s article permits one to view the relation of general semantics to propagandistic strategies. Fleming begins by describing Johnson’s interpretation of Korzybski’s work, which is called the “big six” basic principles of general semantics. These principals are as follows: non-identity, which states that “the word is not the thing”; non-allness, or that “one can never know or say all about anything”; self-reflexiveness, or “people make abstractions of abstractions”; probability principal, “where everything changes…is the basic idea”; symbol-signal reactions, “thinking before reacting” to symbols and “stereotypical and automatic” reactions to signals; and extensionalization, which is “the scientific method…[and] non-verbal definitions” (4). Fleming follows this list with his own enumerated claim stating that propaganda is an exploitation of the big six principles (4). By focusing on the second section of Fleming’s article, which introduces Fleming’s own terminology describing how propagandists violate the principles of general semantics, this paper details the exploitation of general semantics so that educators can develop pedagogical methods for detecting propagandistic rhetoric.

Like Johnson, Fleming lists the components of his claim that propagandists exploit and
misuse general semantics in an enumerated fashion. The list is as follows: name calling, glittering generalities, the transfer device, the testimonial, the plain folks device, card stacking, and the band wagon. Fleming calls these propagandistic techniques the “basic seven” (4). Name calling occurs when a propagandist “gives a negative label to whatever [he or she] wants others to view negatively.” By name calling, the propagandist guides the audience’s reaction to the label, “not to evidence” (4); Fleming gives an adequate example: “…inappropriately [labeling] a group as terrorists.” A propagandist uses glittering generalities by incorporating “vague, abstract, positive terms…to win approval,” as Hitler does in the speech section discussed earlier (5). The transfer device associates “positive qualities of someone or something…to whatever the propagandist is promoting,” an example being the colloquial expression “proud as a lion” when used to describe an individual in a positive light (6). Propagandists use the plain folks device by “presenting [themselves or someone else] as being like the persons in the audience” (9). Mitt Romney’s failed appeal to the Latino/Hispanic communities during his 2012 presidential campaign serves as a contemporary example. The next misuse of general semantics is the act of card stacking, which occurs when a 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” (10), an act apparent in many television commercials in which one company vies against another company’s products or services (i.e. recent Amazon commercials comparing Apple tablets to Amazon’s own tablet). The final technique is the band wagon, in which a propagandist “promotes the idea that everyone else is doing what the propagandist wants the audience to do”—a type of spurious peer pressure (11). The recurrent appearance of these seven propaganda techniques, especially in the twenty-first century, should prompt educators to develop or augment curriculum in order to instruct a student on how to recognize when a
propagandist is using these techniques against him or her.

In order for instructors to develop effective pedagogical strategies for instructing students on how to identify propaganda, new curriculum must be implemented that incorporates the three ethos components mentioned to help students discern when a propagandist is attempting to use ethos for propaganda purposes, as well as for distinguishing between propagandists and other non-propagandist groups or individuals. In addition to the ethos components, this curriculum should inform students about Fleming’s basic seven violations of general semantics, since an awareness of these violations will enable students to sense when one of the seven violations is being used upon or against them. A well-informed student will be able to navigate through the propagandistic schema that is interwoven into his or her particular environment, impeding the aims of any malevolent propagandist.
Works Cited


