The Psycholinguistics of Propaganda: Mechanisms of Subjugation and How to Challenge Them

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Abstract. This paper reviews current research on the oppressive and dehumanizing use of language by those in political power to promote essentialist thought about oppositional groups, including during the war in Ukraine. Essentialism is the implicit belief that categories of people–those of certain ethnicities or nationalities, for example–have intrinsic, immutable properties, driven by some deep, unobservable, and often deterministic causal essence. There is robust evidence that cross-culturally, both young children and adults sometimes employ an essentialist heuristic when reasoning about cultural traits, and that they see others' traits as being less mutable than their own. Strikingly, though, cultures vary drastically in the particulars and extent of this cultural essentialism. Thus, it seems clear that cultural input can to some degree either exploit or overwrite a tendency toward cultural essentialism, with language being an especially powerful mechanism. In this paper, I demonstrate ways that language is intentionally used by those with political power to promote essentialist thought and to justify violence. In particular, I highlight use of generic language, ascriptive definitions, and the language of opposites within propaganda. I end with consideration of ways to be responsive to instances of propaganda within our own communities and as global citizens, such as through pro-social repurposing of the linguistic tools that have been used destructively, promoting nuance through the use of differentiated language, and by capitalizing on an intuitive human belief in essential goodness and desire for truth.

Keywords: ascriptive definitions, disinformation, essentialism, generics, propaganda.

Ісакофф Нора. Психолінгвістика пропаганди: механізми підпорядкування і як їм протистояти.

У цій статті розглядаються сучасні дослідження гнобливого та дегуманізуючого використання мови тими, хто має політичну владу, для просування есенціалістичного погляду щодо опозиційних груп, зокрема під час війни в Україні. Есенціалізм - це неоголошене переконання, що категорії людей, наприклад, певної етнічної чи національної приналежності, мають невід'ємні, незмінні властивості, зумовлені якоюсь глибокою, неспостережуваною та часто детермінованою причинно-наслідковою сутністю. Існують вагомі докази того, що в багатьох культурах і маленькі діти, і дорослі іноді використовують есенціалістську евристику, обґрунтовуючи своє розуміння культурних рис, і вважають риси інших менш мінливими, ніж їхні власні. Але різні культури значно різняться в деталях і масштабах цього культурного есенціалізму. Тому зрозуміло, що культурний внесок може певною мірою або використовувати, або послаблювати вплив культурного есенціалізму, при цьому мова є особливо потужним механізмом. У цій роботі я демонструю засоби, якими мова свідомо використовується для просування есенціалістського світогляду та виправдання насильства тими, хто має політичну

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владу. Зокрема, я підкреслюю застосування у пропаганді загальної мови, приписуваних визначень, та мови протилежностей. Я завершую обговоренням шляхів бути чутливим до випадків пропаганди і в межах наших власних спільнот, і громадян світу, наприклад, перепризначення використовуваних руйнівних мовних інструментів до просоціального вживання, застосування диференційованої мови з метою звернути увагу до відтінків, та використання інтуїтивного людського переконання в існуванні суттєвої доброти та бажання істини.

Ключові слова: *аскрипційні визначення, дезінформація, есенціалізм, дженерики, пропаганда.*

Introduction

This paper reviews current research on the oppressive and dehumanizing use of language by those in political power to promote essentialist thought about oppositional groups, including during the war in Ukraine. Though theories of essentialism differ in their particulars, essentialism is an implicit belief that categories have intrinsic, immutable properties, driven by some deep, unobservable, and often deterministic causal essence that gives rise to observable features (Gelman, 2003). An essentialist view of rabbits, for example, would include the beliefs that there is something inside a rabbit that makes it a rabbit, and that it will always be a rabbit. Without expertise in rabbit genetics, it is not possible to explicate the causal mechanism underlying rabbitness, but this does not eliminate having a belief in an essential cause underlying the observable properties of rabbitness. Though some properties of a rabbit are mutable–it can get older or move to a new location–its essential rabbitness persists. People reason essentially about natural kinds (e.g., the rabbit species), but also about a wide range of other kinds including those that are folksociological in nature such as races, ethnicities, or nationalities (Hirschfeld, 1998).

There is robust evidence that cross-culturally, both young children and adults are inclined to employ an essentialist heuristic when reasoning about cultural traits. For example, five-year-old American children predict that an adopted child will speak the language of their birth parents (Hirshfield & Gelman, 1997), and Mongolian adults from the semi-nomadic Torguud tribe reason that a child adopted as a baby by a member of a racially similar but culturally distinct tribe would culturally resemble the birth family (Gil-White, 2001). Similar examples abound from every age group and from distinct cultures around the globe. Additionally, essentialist beliefs about outgroups seem to emerge earlier than those about ingroups (Pauker, Ambady, & Apfelbaum, 2010) and throughout the lifetime, people generally see others' traits as being less mutable than their own (Rosenberg, 1981).

Strikingly, though, cultures vary drastically in the particulars and extent of this cultural essentialism, with more pervasive essentialist beliefs found in people from higher social classes (Mahalingam, 2007) as well as those with more conservative (Rhodes & Gelman, 2009) or religious (Diesendruck & Haber, 2009) beliefs. Thus, it seems clear that cultural input can to some degree either exploit or overwrite a tendency toward cultural essentialism, with language being an especially powerful mechanism.

Method

This paper argues that language is often intentionally used by those with political power to promote essentialist thought and to justify violence. In particular, I highlight use of generic language, ascriptive definitions, and the language of opposites within propaganda. I end with consideration of ways to be responsive to instances of propaganda within our own communities and as global citizens, such as through pro-social repurposing of the linguistic tools that have been used destructively, promoting nuance through the use of differentiated language, and by capitalizing on an intuitive human belief in essential goodness and desire for truth.

Results and Discussion

Linguistic Features of Generics

One way that essentialism is often induced within propaganda is through the use of generic noun phrases, those that refer to kinds rather than individuals but are not quantified (e.g., they do not include *some*, *most*, or *all*). A generic noun phrase can take the form of a bare plural noun phrase (e.g., *dogs* are adorable). It can also take the form of an indefinite noun phrase with generic scope (e.g., *a dog* is a big responsibility) or of a definite singular noun phrase with generic scope (e.g., *the dog* is a wonderful animal). Despite the syntactic differences in these examples, each makes a claim about a kind. In contrast, non-generic noun phrases can include demonstrative determiners (e.g., *this* dog is chasing its tail), indefinite noun phrases with specific scope (e.g., *a dog* is licking my face), definite singular noun phrases with specific scope (e.g., *the dog* is napping on the blanket), or definite plural noun phrases (e.g., *the dogs* are in their beds.) Here, despite their syntactic differences, each of these claims makes an example about an individual or individuals.

In English, speakers can use joint morphosyntactic clues such as determiners, number, tense, and aspect, to evaluate genericity (Gelman & Tardif, 1998). For example, plural definite noun phrases (e.g., *the dogs* are sweet); past tense (e.g., the dog *was* friendly); and present progressive aspect (e.g., a dog *is barking*) all indicate non-genericity. Noun phrases that are not both plural and definite, present tense, and present simple aspect (e.g., *dogs bark*; *a dog barks*) either imply or permit genericity. In many cases morphosyntactic cues do not suffice for specifying the semantics (e.g., *the dog is intelligent* can have generic or specific scope). Here, English speakers can use pragmatic cues to infer the semantics probabilistically. In morphosyntactically poorer languages such as Mandarin, speakers rely more heavily on pragmatics (Gelman & Tardif, 1998). Additionally, speakers can use prior beliefs about the relationship between a category and its properties (i.e., the prevalence of property given a category and the cue validity of a category given a property) to evaluate the truth value of generic claims (Tessler & Goodman, 2019).

Experimental data demonstrate that when making inferences about a novel category, hearing generic statements (e.g., Zarpies eat flowers) but not non-generic

statements (e.g., this Zarpie eats flowers), tends to lead to essentialist beliefs (Rhodes, Leslie & Tworek, 2012). More specifically, generic statements seem to cause both adults and preschoolers to reason that the properties of a category are innate and inevitable, and further, that they are caused by membership in the category. That is, Zarpies are born flower-eaters, there is nothing that can make them not be flower-eaters, and it is their Zarpieness that makes them be flower-eaters. Additionally, in both preschoolers and adults, hearing generic statements about a property of one category causes the inference that that property does *not* hold for a different category (Moty & Rhodes, 2021). For example, "Zarpies eats flowers" implies "Gorps do not eat flowers," or, as a real-life example, "boys play sports," implies "girls do not play sports".

Generics in Propaganda

Outside the lab, generics are frequently employed within propaganda. Some examples include the Nazi proclamation that "The Jew is fundamentally and basically criminal" (Keller & Anderson, 1937/2002, p. 7); former President Trump's assertion that "A well-educated black has a tremendous advantage over a well-educated white in terms of the job market" (Utley, 1989), and most recently, President Putin's claims that "the Banderite" elite must be liquidated. Its reeducation is impossible." Each of these examples exploits innateness, inevitability, and causality. In the final example, Banderite (" *бандеровец*" in Russian; "бандерівець" in Ukrainian) is a term that has been used in Soviet and Russian propaganda since the 1940s to align all Ukrainians, and especially those who support Ukrainian sovereignty, with the Organization of Ukrainian Nationalists-Bandera, a faction of the rightwing organization responsible for the murder of Polish, Jewish, and Romani people during the Holocaust, according to Wylegela & Glowacka-Grajper (2020). The implication of President Putin's claim is that Ukrainians are fundamentally, immutably murderous.

Generic claims are also used to deny the existence of social justice issues (Saul, 2017). For example, according to a test-retest study conducted before and during former President Obama's time in office, one quarter of Americans believed the election indicated that Black people no longer faced the same level of discrimination (Valentino & Brader, 2011). The study asked people to rate on a 4-point scale their answers to questions that included generics such as, "In the past, we have heard a lot about discrimination against Black people in this country. How much discrimination against Blacks do you think there is in this country?" or to indicate their agreement with sentences such as, "Over the past few years, Blacks have gotten less than they deserved" (Valentino & Brader, 2011). As Saul (2017) has argued, "It is very common for people to reassure themselves that they are not racist against black people by noting that racists dislike black people, and then remarking that they have a black friend. . . It is too easy rhetorically to deny a true generalisation made with a generic by citing a single counter-instance." (p. 13)

Although quantified expressions (e.g., all women, most dogs) also reference a group rather than an individual, generic expressions are unique in ways that make their logical deficiencies less salient and therefore, make them ideal vessels for propaganda. Use of the quantifier *all* opens the speaker up to consideration of counterexamples that

are easily brought to mind. A claim that all Mexican immigrants are rapists or that all Ukranians are scum and traitors would impinge on the listener's ability to explain away their own personal exceptions, such as a trusted neighbor within this category, and would therefore be less compelling. Use of the quantifier *most* prompts the listener to evaluate the facts, asking if this is really true of most members of this category. It is also weaker, precipitating explicit compassion for the minority members of the category. Use of the quantifier *some* implies *not all*. Because generic statements obfuscate these issues, they feature so prominently in propaganda.

Generics Imply Disposition

Generic statements capture a speaker's implication that a category has the *disposition* to have a particular property. In metaphysics, disposition is "a persisting state or condition that makes possible the manifestation" (Mumford, 1998). Crucially, generic statements do not imply that a category is a good *predictor* of having a property, just that it is in a persistent state of possibly manifesting a property (Leslie, 2017). As Tessler and Goodman (2019) noted, the generic statement "The Speaker of the House succeeds the Vice President" is true pursuant to the United States Constitution not because it generally happens—in fact, it has never happened—but because it is disposed to happen. It is fundamental to the role of being Speaker of the House to be in a persistent state of second in line.

Generics are especially apt to imply dispositions in cases where danger is perceived. As Leslie (2017) noted, only a small percentage of ticks carry Lyme disease, and only a small percentage of sharks attack bathers. Being a tick is a poor predictor of carrying Lyme disease, and being a shark is a poor predictor of attacking bathers. However, people reason that ticks and sharks are disposed to have these properties, that they contain a persistent quality of the potential to behave dangerously. Thus, people generally agree that "ticks carry Lyme disease" and "sharks attack bathers" are true statements. In contrast, as Leslie notes, although a comparably small percentage of gas canisters in office chairs have exploded, people generally reason that the statement "office chairs explode" is false. This is because, even though exploding office chairs are dangerous, people do not believe that exploding is within office chairs' disposition. In this way, dispositions are more informative about a person's beliefs about a category than about that category itself.

Similarly, problematic generic statements about racial or ethnic groups are only meaningful insofar as they reflect the speaker's dispositional beliefs, and they are most likely to do so when fear is involved. Anti-Muslim propaganda in the United States, for example, isn't an argument that Muslims are more likely to be terrorists than non-Muslims, but rather, that Muslims are disposed to be terrorists. The nature of this argument makes it impossible to argue against because there is no statistic that can undermine an ineffable causal placeholder.

Dispositional statements are especially powerful because they make use of essentialist placeholders, a psychological phenomenon in which a mental representation of a category consists of an assumption that category members are causally related to the category although the details of this causal relationship are null within the mental

representation. I don't know what rabbit DNA looks like, but I assume that it exists and that it causes rabbits to be members of the rabbit category. My mental representation of rabbit DNA is null other than its causal power. As Tessler & Goodman noted, "Categories are inherently unobservable. You cannot see the category *dog*, only some number of instances of it. Yet, we easily talk about these abstractions, conveying hard-won generalizations to each other and down through generations" (Tessler & Goodman, 2019, p. 31). Essentialist thinking, which is often incited through use of generic language, is especially powerful because it references an invisible monster. That is, there is no causal explanation about why any of these groups carry their abhorrent qualities. The causal mechanism makes use of two placeholders, one for an unknown source that results in the essence, and another for the essence that results in negative qualities. In this model, there is no explication of the underlying cause of the essence or of the essence itself. There is merely a proclamation that this essence exists and exerts uncontainable power (Rose & Nichols, 2019).

As philosopher of dehumanization David Livingstone Smith has argued, dehumanization can easily arise from the fact that "folk-theories are imaginative constructions that seek to explain the observed by citing the unobservable." Consider this quote from a Nazi propaganda book: "Just as the spirochetes which are the bearers of syphilis, so the Jews are the carriers of criminality in its political and non-political form" (Keller & Anderson, 1937/2002, p. 7). There is no explication about why Jews are the carriers of criminality; this is an insidious, invisible essence.

As another example, referring to black people as *thugs* as has been common parlance in the United States (Smiley & Fakunle, 2016), is shorthand for saying that black people have the disposition to be thugs. Calling Black Lives Matter (BLM) protesters "thugs," "terrorists," and "anarchists," as Trump has frequently done (Beer, 2021), is shorthand for saying that BLM protesters have the disposition to be thugs, terrorists, and anarchists. These are dispositional arguments in that they equate Blackness (or Black allyship) with a disposition toward violent criminality.

Those who use this language to describe Blackness generally do not also use it to describe individuals or movements that are not specifically Black, even those that are equally or more likely to engage in violence. For example, although 98% of mass shooters in the United States are men (Peterson, 2021), men as a group are not routinely referred to as thugs. It is Blackness, not maleness, that is seen as causing a disposition toward thugness. Again, because the claim is about disposition, a response about prediction will not suffice. That is, revealing that in fact there is not a significant relationship between race and likelihood of committing a mass shooting (McArdle, 2021), is not particularly relevant to an argument about disposition.

Ascriptive Definitions

In lexical semantics, ascriptive definitions are rigid, dichotomous criteria for meriting a demographic label (Casarez, 2020). In the United States, those holding an ascriptive definition of Americanness might believe that having American ancestry and having been born in the United States are necessary for being authentically American (Simonsen, 2016). Some Americans might also include Whiteness within their ascriptive

definition (Devos & Mohamed, 2014). Those in a privileged position, such as non-immigrant, non-Hispanic White individuals, are most likely to adopt ascriptive definitions of Americanness (Berg, 2015). Not surprisingly, use of ascriptive definitions is strongly associated with hostile beliefs about immigrants, for example, that immigrants are likely to be criminals and to steal American jobs (Casarez, 2020).

Contrastingly, Putin has espoused an ascriptive definition of Russianness by abjectly denying Ukrainian statehood and identity. For example, in a speech in February, 2022, Putin claimed that "Ukraine has never had its own authentic statehood," (Dixon, 2022) and that Ukraine merely constitutes part of Russia's "own history, culture, spiritual space" (Perrigo, 2022). In this way, rather than delimiting Russianness, he has used erasure of Ukrainianness to justify the war.

A particularly interesting example lies at the intersection of ascriptive definitions and generic language. In an anthropological study of adults who live in a Ukranian village and are ethnically Ukranian, Slovakian, or Hungarian, participants were asked a series of questions about identity (Kanovsky, 2007). In response to the question, "Could somebody be both a Ukranian and Slovak citizen at the same time," 90% answered 'yes'. That is, citizenship is not thought of ascriptively. In contrast, in response to the question, "Could somebody be both Ukrainian and Slavic at the same time," 82% answered 'no'. Here, ethnic identity is thought of ascriptively.

Kanovsky argues, "It is clear that people distinguish sharply between pragmatic, political and self-descriptive identities and deeper, inherent ones. Only the latter are essentialist, while the former are not" (pp. 279). Though there are many possible reasons for the essentialist/non-essentialist contrast here, it is noteworthy that only the ethnicity question includes a generic noun phrases. It is possible that this syntactic contrast accounts for some of the difference in results. It would be interesting to ask participants two questions that do not differ in their syntactic structure, such as, "Could somebody have both Ukranian and Slavic citizenship at the same time?" and "Could somebody have both Ukranian and Slavic ethnicity at the same time?"

The Language of Opposites

Finally, those in power often use the language of opposites to manufacture confusion and promote essentialist paradoxes. For example, according to Nazi rhetoric, "Jews were either portrayed as seedy, degenerate, ugly, masses associated with vermin, or they were portrayed as greedy, fat, and unpleasant elements who sided with the enemy" (Narayanaswami, 2011). In the United States, immigrants may be seen as lazy, unskilled parasites expecting benefits in return for nothing or as fierce competitors in the job market.

In Putin's language, Ukranians are at times "hard working and talented" capable of "success and outstanding results," and displaying "perseverence, determination. . . openness, innate optimism, and hospitality" (Putin, 2021). At other times, Ukranians are "insects to be spit on the curb," and the war is an initiative aimed at "a natural and necessary self-detoxification of society." In each case, contradictory language serves to

conjure notions of a bewildering enemy, both dangerous and subhuman, to be deterred by any means necessary.

One reason the language of opposites is such an effective disinformation tool is that people may make sense of mixed messaging by reasoning that it is indicative of nuance and consideration (Rucker, Petty, & Briño, 2008). That is, a clear, consistent message can be seen as biased, whereas internal inconsistency can be seen as trustworthy. More broadly, listeners generally give speakers the benefit of the doubt in interpreting their arguments and seek reasonable explanation for the language opposites. In identifying a good reason for contradictory claims, a listener may be more likely to see these claims as credible (Reich & Tormala, 2013).

Repurposing Linguistic Tools

This paper has explicated ways that language is used to create or reinforce subjugation. To be clear, language misuse is not necessarily an argument for elimination of any linguistic structures. Instead, language can be repurposed pro-socially. For example, as Rhodes et al. (2012) have argued, generic language seems to transmit essentialist thought among people, but it doesn't create essentialist thought.

Essentialist beliefs. . . go far beyond any content that is explicitly communicated by generic language, and essentialism can emerge in the absence of generic language. . . Rather, social essentialism appears to result from the interplay of cognitive biases and cultural input; children's cognitive biases lead them to assume that some or other social categories reflect essential kinds, and generic language signals to them to which categories they should apply these beliefs (Rhodes, Leslie, & Tworek, 2012, p. 13529).

Along similar lines, Saul (2017) argues that generic assertions that *women* are expected to behave a certain way by society, that *Muslims* face discrimination, or that *White Americans* have privilege can bring awareness to issues of social justice. In this way, although it is important to consider how the language of generics might be used to transmit or reinforce negative stereotypes, generics can be repurposed to override negative stereotypes.

The language of opposites can be repurposed by juxtaposing claims about a group side-by-side. For example, in grappling with the idea that poor white people have white privilege, feminist thinker Gina Crosley-Corcoran writes,

> The concept of Intersectionality recognizes that people can be privileged in some ways and definitely not privileged in others. There are many different types of privilege, not just skin color privilege, that impact the way people can move through the world or are discriminated against. These are all things you are born into, not things you earned, that afford you opportunities others may not have (Corcoran, 2019, Ch. 17).

In this way, acknowledging that a person can be safer because they are white but also less safe because they are poor can enable open communication and empathy and serve as a catalyst for nuanced, ground-up policy change.

Differentiated Language

One way to combat the harmful effects of propaganda is through use of language that promotes nuance. Differentiated language can be particularly effective. A differentiated statement calls attention to the distinction between a group and their associated negative stereotype. Several recent papers have analyzed media sources to determine predictors of when Muslims are described in differentiated language (e.g., "terrorists abuse religion," which explicitly distinguishes between Muslims and terrorists) versus undifferentiated language (e.g., "terror, of course, has to do with Islam (von Sikorski, Schmuc, Matthes, Klobasa, Knupfer, & Saumer, 2021)). Von Sikorski et al. found much greater prominence of undifferentiated than differentiated statements across publications and found that this ratio became more extreme soon after a terrorist event. A similar study found that Muslim journalists are much more likely than non-Muslim journalists to make differentiated statements about journalists, especially when reporting on an act of terror; additionally, higher quality newspapers are more likely than tabloid newspapers to make differentiated statements (Matthes, Kaskeleviciute, Schmuck, Sikorski, Klobas, Knupfer, & Saumer, 2020).

Remembering the Human Belief in Essential Goodness and Truth

There is robust evidence that people are more inclined to view positive changes in a person as reflecting their essential goodness and negative changes in a person as reflecting external circumstances. In one study, participants read vignettes describing a change within an individual (Newman, Bloom, & Knobe, 2014). In some examples, the change was positive (e.g., "Amir lives in a culture that supports terrorism. In the past, Amir supported the idea of terrorism to achieve political goals. Now, however, Amir believes that terrorism is wrong"). In other examples, the change was negative (e.g., "Amir lives in a culture that does not support terrorism. In the past, Amir did not support the idea of terrorism. However, now, Amir believes that terrorism is an acceptable way to achieve political goals"), (p. 214).

Participants generally reasoned changes in a positive direction to be the result of essential goodness (i.e., Amir's previous endorsement of terrorism reflected his culture, and his current rejection of terrorism reflects his essential goodness). In contrast, participants generally reasoned changes in a negative direction not to be essentially explainable (i.e., Amir's previous rejection of terrorism reflects his essential goodness, and his current endorsement of terrorism reflects his culture). This propensity to see people as essentially good is promising in that propaganda conflicts with this natural inclination.

Conclusion

Social cognition involves proclivities that can bring out the best and worst in people. For example, people are inclined toward essentialist beliefs, which can easily spiral into tribalism and clash. On the other hand, people are inclined toward believing in

human goodness. With the social world always teetering between dissonance and harmony, language is a particularly powerful tool for pushing it in either direction. Misused generic language, implication of disposition, ascriptive definitions, and the language of opposites can all be used to incite subjugation. However, repurposing linguistic tools and using differentiated language can promote understanding and empathy.

Finally, given the power of propaganda, preemptive defense against propaganda is crucial (Ecker, Lewandowsky, Fenton, & Martin, 2014). Paul & Matthews (2016) offer important insights for how to combat propaganda. These include focusing efforts on countering the effects of propaganda (staying focused on the mission) rather than attacking the propaganda itself (becoming distracted with political discourse). These also include committing to policies that block the onslaught of propaganda, such as by dismantling harmful social media channels and through other cyberspace operations.

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