

Manipulative Uses of Language

1. Euphemism

An expression that substitutes for another expression, because the original is discomfoting, offensive, or unpleasant.

"Military campaigns against American Indian tribes during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries did unfortunately cause some degree of discomfort for the Indians."

2. Orwellism

A specialized form of euphemism that is actually the opposite of the real meaning. Examples from George Orwell's 1984: The Ministry of Peace was the government agency that concerned itself with war; the Ministry of Plenty was the agency that concerned itself with starvation; and the Ministry of Love concerned itself with torture.

3. Doublespeak (or Obfuscation)

Deliberately ambiguous or evasive language that seeks to hide something discomfoting, offensive, or unpleasant. Somewhat like euphemism, except that euphemisms are short phrases or words, while doublespeak consists of at least one full sentence, or several sentences.

"Unfortunately, civilians were killed in the air strikes over Iraq."

Compare this sentence to the following: "U.S. Air Force planes killed civilians while conducting strikes over Iraq. Note: The first sentence omits who is responsible for the deaths, and seeks to hide this fact.

Example of academic doublespeak: "The Correlation between Oral and Somatic Motor Habits." [Note this actually means "Facts and Words."]

4. Blending value claims into factual statements

Uses emotively charged words to make its point. This is commonly used in newspapers.

"The U.S. government has opposed the hardline government of Slobodan Milosevic.

5. Quibbling

Focusing on very minor points of argument, usually to avoid focusing discussion on more important points.

When I accuse someone of being a murderer, who killed eighteen people. He responds by saying "You slandered me. I only killed seventeen."

6. Fine Print Disclaimers

A statement in fine print (or in a footnote, or buried deep in the narrative) that undercuts the significance of statements made in the main body of the narrative.

"The missile attack was an astounding success, as 98 percent of the missiles were launched successfully." In a footnote: "The fact that the missiles were launched successfully does not mean that they reached their targets, in fact only 3 percent of the missiles actually did reach their targets."

7. Glittering Generalities

Statements that contain words or phrases with a positive sound, but which are extremely vague in their actual meaning.

Examples of such words and phrases: "freedom," "liberty," "family," "our way of life."

8. Bandwagon

Statements suggesting that because something is popular it is therefore good, and that you too should support it.

“Your views about the possibility of war with Iraq are completely out of line with what the vast majority believe. Polls show overwhelming support for the president’s position. What’s the matter with you?”

9. Plain Folks

This technique makes an argument with a populist slant, suggesting that the person making the argument has much in common with the common man or women; and because of this, we should accept their arguments.

“My views on communism – that it is dire threat to American security – are not those of the striped pants diplomats who use big words. My views are those of the American people.”

10. Fear

This technique presents information in a sensationalized and often with violent overtones to instill a sense fear and anger into the audience; often the targets of the argument are claimed to be foreign or domestic “enemies.” This is a classic propaganda technique.

“Saddam Hussein is an evil leader who poses a dire threat to the United States, and we must destroy him before he destroys us. This is a leader who tortures children in front of their parents.”