

## MASTER'S THESIS

### Words that won the war: a linguistic analysis of second world war posters

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**WORDS THAT WON THE WAR:  
A LINGUISTIC ANALYSIS  
OF  
SECOND WORLD WAR POSTERS**

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## Abstract

Posters were one of the most popular communication and publicity tools during the Second World War (1939-45). The study of World War II posters is very limited, not to mention its language analysis. Considering the substantial scale of war posters, the variety of themes, and the number of functions the posters covered, the power of language and its influence in the war society should not be neglected. Therefore, this study examines the major language used in the 302 U.S. World War II posters from the *World War II Poster Collection* of the Northwestern University website. In this study, we focused on the analysis of the linguistic features and the communication strategies which are adopted in these posters for propaganda purposes.

The study started with a review of propaganda issues and the common strategies used in propaganda program. A detailed analysis on the linguistic features and communication policies tailored-made for propaganda programs followed. We found that the war posters usually adopt short and simple sentence structure as well as simple but powerful words for the design of the poster headlines. Most of them are presented in declarative or imperative sentences. It reflects that the overwhelming purpose of the poster is to educate the public with instructional messages. The complementary function of text and image picture alters the usage of punctuation in the war posters from the normal text. Most of the poster headlines are left without punctuation in the end of the phrase. The analysis on the use of pronouns among the posters and the overwhelming use of the pronoun "you" in the poster shows that they are highly target-oriented. A straight-forward presentation approach is reflected. On the other hand, active use of graphological features (for example, underline and bold) allows the posters to present information and messages with different level of

significance. These are the linguistic features widely used in the 302 World War II posters we have adopted in this study.

Apart from the above linguistic features, a number of tactful communication strategies are also applied in these 302 posters. In the study, we found that peripheral route of persuasion is widely adopted in developing the logic of a poster. This strategy is realized by giving superficial argument to convince the audience to certain ideas. How could this be achieved? It is simple, propagandists make use of a large variety of approaches to distract the audience and push them to make rush decision. On the other hand, to make the propaganda message more easily accepted, propagandists usually strive to enhance their credibility. Therefore, tactics of making good use of others' credibility or manufacturing credibility are widely seen.

As the ultimate goal of propaganda is to influence the thinking and attitude of the targeted audience so as to provoke them to perform the preferred actions, ensuring their trust is particularly important. Therefore, propagandists usually affect the perception of the public by repeating simple and well-designed ideas with the aims to reinforce the transmitted messages; using symbols to impress and to arouse quick associations of certain ideas with the established norms; and appealing the people's emotions by arousing their fear or shame. Also, to mobilize the public for a cause of action must provide reasonable grounds. In many cases, these reasonable groups are also manufactured by glorious virtue wordings: freedom, peace, and American spirits, etc.

As a reader, also a persuadee, we are usually distracted by the superficial design of a poster, like slogan or image picture. This study provides an understanding of the

precise design of a poster specifically on the linguistic features and the communication strategies.

### 摘要

在二次大戰期間(193-45年)，以海報作為宣傳及傳訊的公具是非常普遍，有關二次大戰海報的研究十分有限，對其語言方面的分析就更少。考慮到二次大戰海報的規模之大、種類之多及其多樣化的功能，所採用之語言的力量及影響力絕不容忽視。是次研究採用了來自美國 Northwester University 圖書館網頁中的一個二次大戰海報收藏庫的三百零二張戰時海報，分析這些在海報上用來宣傳戰爭的特別語言技巧及傳訊策略。

研究首先從戰爭宣傳計劃及其一般策略著手，接著是仔細分析這些專門為戰爭宣傳計劃設計的語言特徵及傳訊技巧。在設標題方面，我們發現這些海報普遍採取較短及結構簡單的句子，以及簡短而尖銳的用詞，當中大部分是由陳述句及命令式句子組成，這正反映出這些海報的最主要功能是教育美國大眾市民如何面對戰時生活。同時，我們發現海報的標點符號的應用與一般文體有別，這些海報多數沒有以任何標點符號結尾的。標語上的代名詞應用手法亦反映了這些海報著重以讀者為中心，多選擇以直接的方式表達海報的內容。為表達不同層次的標語，這些戰時海報均廣泛地運用了不同類型的文字形態修飾技巧（例如底線和粗體等）；此等都是這三百零二張二次大戰海報中所採用的語言特徵。

除了語言技巧運用外，這三百零二張海報也採用了許多溝通策略。我們發現戰爭宣傳者在設計海報的思維方面，一般喜愛應用表面的游說技巧，通過簡單、表面的理論去說服讀者，同時又以大量的其他方法去分散讀者的注意力，從而使他們容易在緊張的環境下作決策。另外，為使所宣傳的訊息更容易被接納，戰爭宣傳

者通常會努力提升自身的信譽，所以利用其他人和事的聲譽或自製信譽作宣傳並不罕見。

由於戰爭宣傳活動的最終目的是影響讀者的思想、態度，從而觸發他們作出某些預設的行為，確保讀者對宣傳物的信任是十分重要的，於是，戰爭宣傳者很多時都會於大眾前不斷重複一些簡潔而精巧的概念，目的是要強化普羅大眾對此意念的印象和認識；同時，他們亦喜歡利用符號或圖象所帶來的象徵意義帶出某些重要主題；不得不提的還有戰爭宣傳者煽動大眾情緒的手法，當中尤以針對市民的恐慌及同情心為主要。要動員市民支持某些行動，首要因素是能夠以合理的理由使他們信服，其實在許多情況下，這些所謂合理的理由都戰爭宣傳者製造出來的，好像那些冠冕堂皇的道德名詞：自由、和平及美國精神等。

作為讀者，亦即被游說的目標，在閱讀海報時我們通常會被它表面的設計吸引，例如口號或影象，是次研究加深我們對海報的認識，特別是對其在語言設計及溝通技巧利用方面的了解。

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