

Linda Zhang

Project report

MACS390, “Media, war and peace”

Autumn session, 2011

Media and Cultural Studies, University of Wollongong

The project report assignment had two parts. For details of the assignment see http://www.bmartin.cc/classes/MACS390_11outline.pdf

Linda Zhang prepared

- (1) an information pack in the form of slide show, available as a separate file
- (2) a fictional dialogue about doing the project, which starts on the next page.

This document is located at http://www.bmartin.cc/classes/MACS390_11tops/.

MACS390 PROJECT REPORT

Context:

Two MACS390 students (one American, one Australian) are discussing conflict in the Middle East. They can't remember the last time they heard any news of Iraq and this leads them to talk about how wars are sanitized and easily forgotten. They apply grammar of war discourse theory to Bush's War Ultimatum speech and the subsequent reporting of the war. By thinking laterally they discover how language is used to make war appear necessary. It is used to continually control information and manipulates how events are construed by an unsuspecting public.

DIALOGUE:

Alison: There's been so much in the news lately about violence in the Middle East; it seems everyday there are new reports on Libya and Gaddafi.

Brooke: Isn't it strange though, this time last year it was all about Iraq and now it feels as if that war never even happened.

A: It's the same back home in America. It's like the war started in 2003, was prematurely declared 'mission accomplished,'¹ went on for another 7 years before ending last August - and now nothing. I don't believe in the saying that 'no news is good news.'²

B: I guess the government wants it to seem like it never happened - especially after the lies about WMD's and yellow cake and also the negative image following the torture at Abu Ghraib and the Blackwater controversy.

A: I know, but it's strange to think that it started out like an ideal narrative but then became an absolute public relations disaster.³

B: What do you mean by ideal narrative?

A: Well it was the perfect opportunity to wage war. The 9/11 attacks were still fairly recent and the public wanted answers. In his Ultimatum speech Bush said Iraq was linked to Al Qaeda and that Saddam was going to support terrorists.⁴ He made it seem as though we had to go to war.

B: I guess it's all about the language that you use. To sell war successfully is incredibly hard as it comes at a huge cost. Theorist Annabelle Lukin actually questions how information is provided about prosecuting war without turning people off completely - it is after all pretty ugly business.⁵ I wonder *how* the public consent to it.

A: I suppose it comes down to what is and isn't said, and most importantly *how* it's said. We're no longer fighting just a physical war but also an information war.⁶ Language is a highly plastic resource and can be used to promote war and achieve certain aims.

B: I came across the theorist Eric Louw in POL224. He talks about specific elements needed to sell war and Bush's speech had it all. There must be demonization of an identifiable villain, selective portrayal of history, a destabilized target regime and victims in need of saving.⁷

A: You're absolutely right. When reading his speech carefully those elements are all apparent: Saddam is the 'deadly foe' and Iraq is the 'regime with a history of reckless aggression.' But does Louw say who is responsible for portraying these elements?

B: Most often information comes from the government such as Bush's speech, but then filters into the media. Words are carefully chosen to create an 'us vs. them' scenario. *We* are fighting for peace whilst *they* pose a threat to their own people and the world. Then the media rehashes what was said and the public buys into it.

A: That must be what Lukin means when she says that government, military and media are the main institutions in the practice of controlling and disseminating information.⁸

B: Language was used in his speech to create urgency and fear - that war is necessary and necessary now. Repetition of 'regime' and 'disarm' are used to hype up the unavoidability of war. In fact, 'disarming' Saddam was probably the most important piece of evidence in the lead up to war. He knew there needed to be a solid reason – and he needed the public to believe it.

A: You mean 'supposedly' solid; weapons were never found.

B: Exactly my point! It wasn't even true. But Bush said it as if it was an undeniable fact; and that led the public to accept it as fact.

A: It's kind of like history repeating itself. Did you know that to sell the first Gulf War a PR firm arranged for a Kuwaiti girl to lie to the US Congressional Committee that she witnessed Iraqi troops throw babies out of incubators?⁹

B: What! So it was an event that never happened?

A: It was a complete lie just like the WMD's, but it served its purpose in persuading the public that war was warranted. I guess truth really is the first casualty of war.

B: And then throughout the war truth is continually 'missing in action.' Reporting is biased, sanitized and surrounded by what Louw calls 'terminological fog.'¹⁰ So many reports on the Iraq war used military language to detract from the real brutality.

A: I agree. It basically achieves the goal of mystifying and obscuring as much as possible. Examples I remember include using ‘collateral damage’ for civilian deaths and ‘sorties’ for bombing –technical language, acronyms and euphemisms basically sterilizes the war.

B: That must have been Bush’s reason for making WMD’s a euphemism too. It was a highly emotive, spin doctored term that was repeated continuously. Attribution of responsibility is another element that can be manipulated through language. Lukin says that instead of reporting ‘*Coalition forces dropped bombs on Baghdad*’ it will be ‘*Bombs fell on Baghdad*’ as if the bombs fell by themselves and were not caused by anyone.¹¹ This makes the public desensitized from the event and severely lessens its impact.

A: Another major technique is ambiguity. When WMD’s weren’t found the justification was reformulated to “WMD related activities,” later it was “intent to reconstitute WMD’s.” Eventually the whole WMD pretext was discarded in favour of “promotion of democracy.”¹²

B: So basically the reason for invasion became more and more vague when weapons failed to materialise. I suppose it was necessary though, Bush did specifically say that intelligence left *no doubt* that Saddam possessed the deadliest weapons ever devised.

A: I guess the reality is leaders play a huge role in the process of circulating information; they state some facts, omit others and sometimes even blatantly lie.

B: Yeah and the worrying thing is its all about choice, *their* choice - of words and grammar. I suppose this is true for all language, but in war reporting Lukin says there is a more pressing need to understand the ideological consequences of these choices.¹³

A: That must be why Lukin calls grammar ‘covert operation.’¹⁴ It basically operates to construct versions of reality. Just think of the toppling of Saddam’s statue. The media called it Iraqi’s celebrating their liberation¹⁵ when in reality it was stage managed by U.S psy ops.¹⁶

B: I know. I saw an image of Firdos Square where the toppling occurred and there was hardly anyone there; the square had been sealed off by U.S tanks. I suppose Lukin’s right when she says facts never speak for themselves: they have to be brought into existence through choices.¹⁷

A: For this project, I tried searching the internet to find mainstream news article on the staging but couldn’t find any. Instead it was only alternate news sites that had published the scam. That really makes you question the media’s role these days.

B: What can be done though? Reality construction was applicable to reporting all the way till the end of the war. I remember reading a Sydney Morning Herald article¹⁸ about the last battalion leaving Iraq and it was reported in the style of what Louw calls the upbeat, happy

ending.¹⁹ There was no mention of the billions of dollars spent or the hundreds of thousand civilian deaths.²⁰

A: But the war's after-effects are hardly over.

B: Right, they're just not reported. There is so little news on depleted uranium, babies born with defects or the disastrous economic state Iraq is now in.²¹ It seems so far from Bush's promise of building a new Iraq that is 'prosperous and free.'

A: That is definitely not how I would describe Iraq today. The irony is that this humanitarian ideal was most likely specifically constructed to persuade us. Remember how Louw said selling war requires victims in need of saving?

B: I guess Iraq is the perfect modern example of how grammar of war discourse applies. In hindsight, it wasn't so much the Iraqi people that were in need of saving but rather the principles of certain institutions and the way they use grammar to influence public opinion

A: Yeah, it's pretty scary to think that wars come about because of lies constructed by our government. I really hope our project will give people a clearer understanding of the processes of language that are work and their hidden objectives.

B: I also hope it shows the strength of de Bono's lateral thinking. De Bono says instead of digging deeper into one hole and staying within one perceptual framework, we should move into a different position and start digging a fresh hole.²² Hopefully in the future the public will be more informed and won't be so easily persuaded again to blindly consent to wars that are simply unjustified

A: Well, the reports keep coming in on Libya, and Gaddafi is being demonized just like Saddam; so I guess only time will tell.

Source Endnotes:

¹ *Wikipedia* 'Mission Accomplished speech' accessed 06/06/2011, available at: http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/2003_Mission_Accomplished_speech

² McCloskey, M. 'Is Iraq the new Forgotten War' April 23, 2011. Accessed 06/06/2011, available at: <http://www.stripes.com/news/is-iraq-the-new-forgotten-war-1.139919>

³ *San Francisco Chronicle* 'Tony Blair: Acknowledging Iraq-war becomes PR disaster', accessed 06/06/2011, available at: http://www.sfgate.com/cgi-bin/blogs/worldviews/detail?entry_id=11118#ixzz1OUbB8hoR

⁴ Bush, G.W. (2003, March 18). *Full text: bush's speech*. Accessed 06/06/2011, available at: <http://www.guardian.co.uk/world/2003/mar/18/usa.iraq>

⁵ Lukin, A. 2005, 'Information Warfare: The Grammar of Talking War', *Social Alternatives*, vol.24, no.1 pp.5 -10, pp.5

⁶ Lukin, A. 2005, pp.5

⁷ Louw, E. 2010, *Media and the Political Process*, Sage Los Angeles, pp.151

⁸ Lukin, A. 2005, pp.5

⁹ Louw, E. 2010, pp.153

¹⁰ Louw, E. 2010 pp.153

¹¹ Butt, D.G. Lukin, A. & Matthiessen, C.M. 2004, pp.62

¹² Safdari, C. 2006, 'Rhetoric for War: First Iraq, than Iran', *Global Dialogue*, vol.8, no.1. Accessed 06/06/2011, available at: <http://www.worlddialogue.org/content.php?id=368>

¹³ Butt, D.G. Lukin, A. & Matthiessen, C.M. 2004, 'Grammar - the first covert operation of war' *Discourse & Society*, 15(2-3) pp.58-74

¹⁴ Butt, D.G. Lukin, A. & Matthiessen, C.M. 2004, pp.59

¹⁵ *The Guardian* 'US: We are seeing History Unfold' April 10, 2003. Accessed 05/06/2011, available at: <http://www.guardian.co.uk/world/2003/apr/10/iraq.iraq2>

¹⁶ *Daily Kos* 'Army Report confirms Psy Ops staged Saddam Statue Toppling' October 07, 2004. Accessed 05/06/2011, available at: <http://www.dailykos.com/story/2004/10/07/57574/-Army-Report-Confirms-Psy-ops-Staged-Saddam-Statue-Toppling>

¹⁷ Butt, D.G. Lukin, A. & Matthiessen, C.M. 2004, pp.60

¹⁸ *Sydney Morning Herald*, 'Road of blood and regret for soldiers of last patrol', August 20, 2010. Accessed 06/06/2011, available at: <http://www.smh.com.au/world/road-of-blood-and-regret-for-soldiers-of-the-last-patrol-20100819-12s2y.html>

¹⁹ Louw, E. 2010 pp.152.

²⁰ *Iraq Body Count*. Accessed 06/06/2011, available at: <http://www.iraqbodycount.org/>

²¹ *The Age* 'US Weapons suspected in Birth Defect cases' January 1, 2011. Accessed 06/06/2011, available at: <http://www.theage.com.au/world/us-weapons-suspected-in-iraq-birth-defect-cases-20101231-19byd.html>

²² De Bono, Edward 'Lateral thinking and Parallel thinking.' Accessed 05/06/2011, available at: <http://www.edwdebono.com/lateral.html>