

# Propaganda as expressed through nouns<sup>i</sup>

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## **Abstract:**

Previous studies have often used a critical discourse approach to analyse propaganda texts. Although the social function of language in propaganda texts is well recognised and researched, the systematic aspect of the language used to fulfil this function seems less well understood. To draw more general conclusions about the way in which nouns are used to express propaganda, Systemic Functional Linguistics was used to analyse texts identified as propaganda. This study is a qualitative study, although a quantitative presentation of the data is also provided.

The texts used in the study thematically pertain to former South African president Jacob Zuma and are a combination of texts thematically focusing on two controversial South African cases namely Nkandla and state capture. During Zuma's term, he was implicated in both of these cases. The events enjoyed large-scale media attention and many texts were generated, some of which were pro-Zuma and some of which were against Zuma. These texts are all available in the public domain.

Some of the salient findings include: the propaganda text group contains more subjective nouns than the non-propaganda text group. This high number of evaluative terms can be understood with the interpersonal metafunction in mind. In order for propagandists to attain their aims, they have to invite the receiver of the communication to join their perspective. These nouns are often used in collocations and can be used to create a specific discourse in a society. It is well known that nouns are used for different propaganda techniques, especially for dysphemism, but it can also be used for a specific type of dysphemism, namely, self-dysphemism.

## 1. Introduction and background

Language is integral in constructing propaganda. The focus of previous research on its role has varied, ranging from studies specific to linguistic aspects of propaganda texts (e.g. Abed 2015; Boardman 1978; Bosinelli & Maguire 1984; Gambrell 2012; Mayaffre & Scholz 2017; Pasitselska & Baden 2020; Pawlowski 2008a; 2008b; Wodak 2007), those addressing power relations in language associated with propaganda (e.g. Ahmadian & Farahani 2014; Bolinger 1980; Fairclough 1992; 1995; 2001; Gee, 2011a; Gee, 2011b; Mesthrie 2009), and those with sections on or references to the ways in which language is incorporated into propaganda (e.g. Black 2001; Doob 1950; Ellul 1965; Herf 2005; Jowett & O'Donnell 2012; Stanley 2015; Wasburn 1992). Although the social function of language in propaganda texts is well understood and researched, the systematic aspect of the language used to fulfil this function seems less well understood, especially when such texts are compared to non-propaganda texts<sup>ii</sup>.

Critical discourse analysis has been used to analyse the function and the interpretation of power relations in propaganda texts. Van Leeuwen (1996), for example, approaches the role of social actors in a text using a sociosemantic point of departure for identifying linguistic realisations. The present study takes an inverted approach to the order of analysis in comparison to Van Leeuwen's (1996) approach, by first looking at the linguistic realisations in the texts, after which a sociosemantic interpretation is given in the analysis. Systemic functional linguistics can be used for understanding how form is linked with function, and is therefore used in this study to focus on linguistic forms associated with propaganda in order to explore its potential linguistic properties. Here, I focus specifically on the deployment of nouns in the selected propaganda texts.

The following research questions were asked: What is the role that nouns play in realising propaganda techniques? How do the findings compare with the known functions of nouns in propaganda, as identified in the existing literature? By understanding how nouns were used to build out propaganda in these specific cases, such noun functions can assist us in better understanding their linguistic function in propaganda texts in general.

South Africa has had its struggles, also in the years after the end of apartheid. The period of Jacob Zuma's presidency (2009–2018) was marked by several defining corruption events. The texts used in the study thematically pertain to former South African president Jacob Zuma and are a combination of texts thematically centring around two controversial

South African cases, namely Nkandla and state capture. During Zuma's term, he was implicated in both of these cases. The events enjoyed large-scale media attention and many texts were generated, some of which were pro-Zuma and some of which were against Zuma.

'Nkandla', Zuma's private homestead, underwent expensive taxpayer-funded security and luxury upgrades when Zuma became South Africa's president. The lavish improvements in the name of 'security features' (and misconduct during the process) provided ample opportunities for corruption and cost an estimated R250 m of public money (Simelane 2019).

The second case, referred to as 'state capture', relates to Zuma's relationship with the Gupta family who had an undue amount of influence in South African business and political matters (BBC 2019). With the help of the British public relations company, Bell Pottinger, and Zuma's son, Duduzane, a propaganda campaign was created in South Africa in order to provide a smokescreen to deflect attention away from the true perpetrators, which included the aforementioned. The Commission of Inquiry, chaired by Deputy Chief Justice Raymond Zondo, was created in 2018 with the aim to "inquire into, make findings, report on and make recommendations" concerning "allegations of state capture, corruption, and fraud" (South Africa 2018). Former president Zuma had to testify before this commission in July 2019 and was called to appear before the commission again at the time this article was written.

## **2. Literature review**

Although there are different approaches to propaganda, a few shared denominators can be identified (own emphasis added): propaganda entails a *deliberate* attempt to *alter* or *change* a target group's *attitudes* in order to prepare the target group to act *in accordance with the propagandist's needs* (Qualter 1962: 27). Similar to Qualter, Jowett and O'Donnell (2012: 7) emphasise the *intentionality* that goes with propaganda, the attempt to alter perceptions, cognitions and behaviour in the hope of creating a reaction or response that is *beneficial to the propagandist* (see also Jenkins (2014:1) and Miller (1937: 210)). This response can either be a call to *act* or to be *passive*, as preferred by the propagandist (Ellul 1965: 61). The desired action can be evoked by manipulating certain significant or conventional symbols in order to manipulate collective attitudes (Lasswell 1927: 627). It is

especially the presence of *manipulation* in propaganda that can be used as a point of discernment between this communication form and persuasion as a different, but similar, type of communication (Kolenda 2013: 2; O’Keefe 2002: 4).

Propaganda can therefore be defined as the result of a deliberate and designed attempt by a propagandist to manipulate the attitudes of a target audience in such a way that would result in favourable actions at the right time. These actions are subservient to the propagandist’s main aim of which the direct outcome is only or mainly beneficial to the propagandist and his or her associated parties.

For the propagandist to let his or her aim realise, different propaganda techniques play an important role. Bolinger (1980: 118-119) identifies three main ways in which language can be manipulated in a situation where power is at play: euphemism (giving a positive term to something that has negative connotations), dysphemism (ascribing negative properties to one’s opposition) and mystification (jargon used to hide certain meanings). In this regard, also refer to the views of Mesthrie (2012: 321-322).

These propaganda techniques are important to conceptualise because they form the goals that need linguistic realisation; this realisation could potentially be achieved by nouns. The propagandist selects linguistic items for their semantic value in order to realise the content of propaganda techniques. The appraisal theory, as extension to the systemic functional linguistic framework, illustrates the different ways in which language can be deployed as a way to evaluate something or someone (White 2015).

Nouns in propaganda have previously enjoyed attention in the literature and Bolinger (1980: 77-79) sheds light on why this may be. He explains that nouns have a high semantic potential – even more so than adjectives – and that nouns can bring across a more intense prejudice than adjectives (Bolinger 1980: 79). One way in which we can understand the bias that can be incorporated into nouns is by referring to someone’s nationality with the aim of offending or presenting them in a derogatory manner (Bolinger 1980: 79). Nouns have a “branding power” (Bolinger 1980: 79) which can be used in propaganda to derogate an opponent by using a noun in order to incorporate dysphemism.

According to Bolinger (1980: 79), if a speaker really wants to offend someone, they would rather use a noun than an adjective. For example, instead of calling someone an “ungrateful person”, the heavier semantic loading of a noun containing bias can be seen when that person is rather called an “ingrate”. A person’s nationality can also be objectified

in this way (Bolinger 1980: 79), for example, calling an Englishman a “khaki” or a “redneck” in South Africa (Hauptfleisch 1993: 92, 101, 104). Although Bolinger does not use the term, a “racial or ethnic group’s derogatory nickname for another” can, in general, be called an ethnophaulism (Erdman 1962: 442).

In comparison to Bolinger (1980), Black (2001: 133) chooses to focus on a more specific type of noun, namely, unverified or unverifiable abstract nouns. He believes that propagandists prefer these rather than “empirical validations to establish its truths, conclusions, or impressions”. Although Black does not elaborate on this statement, it could be that propagandists use the abstractness of certain nouns, or even the process of nominalisation, to hide agency or to hide reality. Mayaffre and Scholz (2017) and Pasitselska and Baden (2020), for example, use discourse analysis to illustrate how empty signifiers such as ‘the people’ contribute to propagandistic discourse. As Black’s study is not a linguistic study, it is unclear how he arrived at the list of linguistic features mentioned, emphasising the need for a clearly formulated, formal linguistic study.

Orwell (1968: 136) echoes Black’s (2001) impression about the importance of abstract terms when he refers to political language. Orwell’s book, *1984* (Orwell 1949), can be seen as commentary on propaganda language as consisting “largely of euphemism, question-begging and sheer cloudy vagueness”. By providing examples of nouns (among other parts of speech), this notion is explained in a similar fashion by Bolinger (1980). For example, in political language and propaganda, a word such as “pacification” is used (Orwell 1949:136). This word does not correlate with reality when the thing it presents is considered: “Defenceless villages are bombarded from the air, the inhabitants driven out into the countryside, the cattle machine-gunned, the huts set on fire with incendiary bullets ...” Orwell (1949: 136) explains that this type of phraseology is needed if “one wants to name things without calling up mental pictures of them”. In this case, by using abstract terms, important and sensitive information is kept from the reader by using a word that does not accurately represent reality.

Similar to Black (2001) and Orwell (1968), Herf (2005: 54-56) also mentions that abstract terms, or “the language of euphemism and deception”, was an important way for Nazis to discuss their policies regarding Jews, but illustrates that more concrete or “non-euphemistic” and “nonmetaphorical” language was also used. Herf (2005:55) provides examples of nouns that have concrete, non-euphemistic meanings, regardless of the

context; for instance, “*Vernichtung* and *Ausrottung*, meaning ‘annihilation’, ‘extermination’, ‘total destruction,’ and ‘killing’”. Herf (2005) therefore focuses attention on the important role that both abstract and concrete nouns can play in propaganda and shows that concrete nouns are used but, seemingly, sometimes overlooked.

Another important aspect to consider is Orwell’s ‘Newspeak’. The aim of Newspeak is “not to extend but to diminish the range of thought, and this purpose was indirectly assisted by cutting the choice of words down to a minimum” (Orwell, 1949: 313). One of the ways in which this process could be executed in Orwell’s dystopic novel, *1984*, was by creating new words in order to provide a semantic structure, according to the government’s needs, but also to cancel certain words by creating a term that is comprehensive in itself and therefore containing a variety of words (Orwell 1949: 313). Toying with the semantic range of words could also offer a propagandist the chance to source the dysphemistic value wordplay can offer.

The following section explains the theoretical background according to which the nouns in the relevant texts were analysed. This is followed by an analysis of the data.

### **3. Theoretical background**

#### ***3.1 Systemic functional linguistics***

The study comprised a textual analysis using the systemic functional linguistic framework, according to which linguistic features are analysed in terms of the different metafunctions of language. Critical discourse analysis (CDA) is often used to analyse propaganda texts, but mainly focuses on the underlying power relations in specific texts and not necessarily on the systematic aspect of language itself.

In the systemic functional linguistic (SFL) approach, functionality is regarded as intrinsic to language and the design of language is structured according to function, with the effect that language is analysed with regard to its usage (Halliday 1970: 141; Halliday & Matthiessen 2004: 31). SFL can therefore be used to draw more general conclusions about text types, in this case propaganda as a text type.

Nouns form a part of the nominal word group in SFL. The nominal group refers to specific word classes, namely nouns, adjectives, numerals and determiners (Halliday & Matthiessen 2004: 52). The element which is referred to as a ‘Thing’ is the semantic core of

the nominal group and can be a common noun, proper noun or (personal) pronoun (Halliday & Matthiessen 2004: 325). Common and proper nouns are the main focus in this study.

Common nouns are nouns that are common or generalised to a specific class of referents and form the focus of this study (Halliday & Matthiessen 2004: 326). Common nouns are used to name all the classes of phenomena that are admitted as things by the language and therefore as participants in different types of processes (Halliday & Matthiessen 2004: 326). Proper nouns are names of specific persons, individuals or of a group, different kinds of institutions and places (Halliday & Matthiessen 2004: 325).

### ***3.2 Evaluative language***

Evaluative, marked linguistic forms can be expected in propaganda because propagandists depend on a certain interpretation framework, based on their pre-structured judgement. This type of language is therefore needed in order to present certain events or persons to the reader, which will eventually help to reach a certain goal. Language users have a set of different language options to choose from and these options have different semantic consequences for which the language user can be held accountable (Butt & Lukin 2009: 192). Language can often be “loaded” or “biased” (Bolinger 1980: 72, 76-77).

Evaluation in language is based on what the author’s opinion implies about something being written or spoken about and whether that something is good or bad (Thompson & Hunston 1999: 3). When a language element, in this case a noun, contains a value judgement in itself, it can be understood as a subjective, evaluative noun, in comparison to an objective, non-evaluative noun, which does not invite the reader to share an attitude or judgement with the author about something or someone. In other words, an objective noun has a basic semantic value, but a subjective noun presents an extra, evaluative semantic layer, along with its basic meaning. This type of identification can therefore be done through semantic decomposition: if the noun only has a basic meaning that can be recovered, it is objective. If there is a referential meaning and an extra layer of interpersonal, non-referential meaning, then the noun is subjective (evaluative).

In this study, the nouns were sorted similar to the classification method of Hunston and Sinclair (2000), by classifying lexical items with a clear evaluation according to their semantic role. Apart from considering the immediate and para-context for interpretation, cases where the lexical item was a border case between being objective or subjective (evaluative),

such cases were considered with even more attention to the context, in order to identify any form of covert value judgement which might be present (see Hunston, 2004).

Although a subjective (evaluative) term can overall be associated with or expected in propaganda texts, it is important to note that this does not imply the complete absence of subjective (evaluative) terms in non-propaganda texts. This would also mean that, although more objective terms can be expected in non-propaganda texts, it does not imply that there are no objective terms in propaganda texts as these constitute the body of any text.

### **3.2 Data analysis**

As mentioned in the introduction, the texts used in the study pertain to former South African president Jacob Zuma and are a combination of texts thematically centring around two controversial South African cases, namely Nkandla and state capture. The events enjoyed large-scale media attention and many texts were generated, some supporting and others criticising Zuma.

The initial text selection was made according to a general impression of the text's nature and according to communication domains that are often associated with propaganda and non-propaganda. These texts are available in the public domain. The identified group of texts were then further analysed and identified as propaganda or non-propaganda with the help of a propaganda identification model, which was developed as part of a larger study (Maritz 2019). This identification model was compiled by drawing on existing propaganda identification models and by making use of other content-based elements (for example, analytic tools from narratology such as characters and events in combination with the presence or absence of propaganda techniques) in order to avoid possible circle argumentation. Linguistic elements should not form a part of the textual identification process so that the eventual conclusion is drawn as a true result of the linguistic analysis and not because it formed part of the initial set of identification tools. Borderline texts were set aside. For a full explanation on how this model was developed and applied to identify a text as propaganda, refer to the study of Maritz (2019).

The eight non-propaganda texts served as a control group. Each of the text groups comprises four English and two Afrikaans texts in order to prevent drawing language-specific conclusions. In future, this study can be extended by doing an analysis with more texts from different contexts and, where possible, different languages.



Texts in the propaganda text group consist mainly of press releases and texts written by individuals, such as an opinion piece and an open letter, and have a total length of 6 634 words. Texts in the non-propaganda text group mainly consist of newspaper articles and have a total length of 6 285 words.

Although this study is a qualitative study, texts in both text groups were approached as a small corpus. The textual analysis was conducted with the help of *WordSmith Tools 7* and texts were syntactically tagged by hand, according to word groups.

Non-propaganda texts and propaganda texts were handled independently when calculations were made and a concordance list was drawn up for nouns in both groups of texts. These lists were processed in *Excel*-format. Because of the expected high volume of subjective (evaluative) nouns in propaganda texts, the noun list was sorted according to objective or neutral nouns and subjective or evaluative nouns. A subset of nouns that can directly be associated with nationality was also identified according to objective and subjective terms.

The researcher's classification of nouns was reviewed independently by another rater, after consultation about the classification criteria. All cases of disagreement were resolved jointly; the reported results represent the consensus of the two raters.

### **3.2.1 Results and discussion**

As discussed in section 2, the literature indicates certain propaganda techniques that can be associated with nouns. These techniques, namely euphemism and mystification, dysphemism and Newspeak, are used to structure the second part of the discussion. The first part consists of a more general discussion on the nature of the nouns in both text groups.

A quantitative summary of the data is first presented after which the data are analysed by using a qualitative approach. All the examples are listed, followed by a discussion. The specific noun example discussed is indicated in bold. When there is an adjective-noun construction where the adjective is important to better contextualise the noun, the adjective is underlined, although it is not the focus of the discussion. Examples are drawn from the propaganda text group, unless otherwise indicated.

### **3.2.1 Objective nouns**

Although objective nouns can rather be associated with non-propaganda texts, its role in both text groups should be considered. Consider the following examples in non-propaganda texts: (1) disclosure; (2) *verslag* 'report'; (3) *parlementsleden* 'members of parliament'; (4) whopping price. These can be compared with the following examples from propaganda texts: (5) residence; (6) *vliegtuie* 'aeroplanes'; (7) world; (8) nimmereindigende kruisondervraging 'never-ending cross-examination'.

The presence of objective nouns in non-propaganda and propaganda texts (consider examples (1–3) and (5–7) in both groups) is due to the thematic and semantic relevance of these nouns, which therefore fulfil the ideational metafunction in the text. Objective nouns in non-propaganda and propaganda texts show similarities as they are not used to evaluate what they denote. There are even similarities between the type of adjective-noun collocations used in the two text groups. Examples (4) and (8) in both text groups contain an objective noun, paired with a subjective adjective.

When the total number of objective nouns per text group is divided by the total number of nouns in that text group, it amounts to 96,4% for non-propaganda texts and 89,1% for propaganda texts. The non-propaganda text group therefore has 7,3% more objective nouns than the propaganda text group. The mean value for the non-propaganda text group is 95,9% and 89% for the propaganda text group. The standard deviation for the non-propaganda text group is 3,6% and the standard deviation for the propaganda text group is 13%. When the minimum value (as a type of outlier) is removed from the propaganda text group data set, the difference is smaller, but the mean is still higher in the non-propaganda text group than in the propaganda text group.

Although objective nouns are more frequently found in non-propaganda texts, the difference between non-propaganda and propaganda texts in this regard is not as prominent as the difference between the text groups when it comes to incorporating subjective nouns.

### **3.2.2 Subjective nouns**

Subjective nouns can be expected in propaganda texts because of their evaluative potential, but these subjective forms are still present in both text groups. Consider the following examples in non-propaganda texts: (9) scandal; (10) exposé; (11) *kommunisme*-

*bangmaakpraatjies* ‘communism scare talk’; (12) propaganda. These examples can be compared to similar subjective nouns in propaganda texts: (13) *plundery* ‘plundering’; (14) abuse; (15) scandal.

The differences between propaganda and non-propaganda texts in terms of subjective nouns are more prominent. When the percentage of subjective nouns per text group is determined according to the total number of nouns in that text group, it amounts to 3,6% for non-propaganda texts and 10,9% for propaganda texts. The propaganda text group therefore contains 7,3% more subjective nouns than the non-propaganda text group.

The mean value of the non-propaganda text group is 4,1% in comparison to 11% in the propaganda text group.

. The standard deviation for the non-propaganda text group is 3,6% and the standard deviation for the propaganda text group is 13%. When the maximum value (as a type of outlier) is removed from the propaganda text group data set, the difference is smaller, but the mean is still higher in the propaganda text group than in the non-propaganda text group.

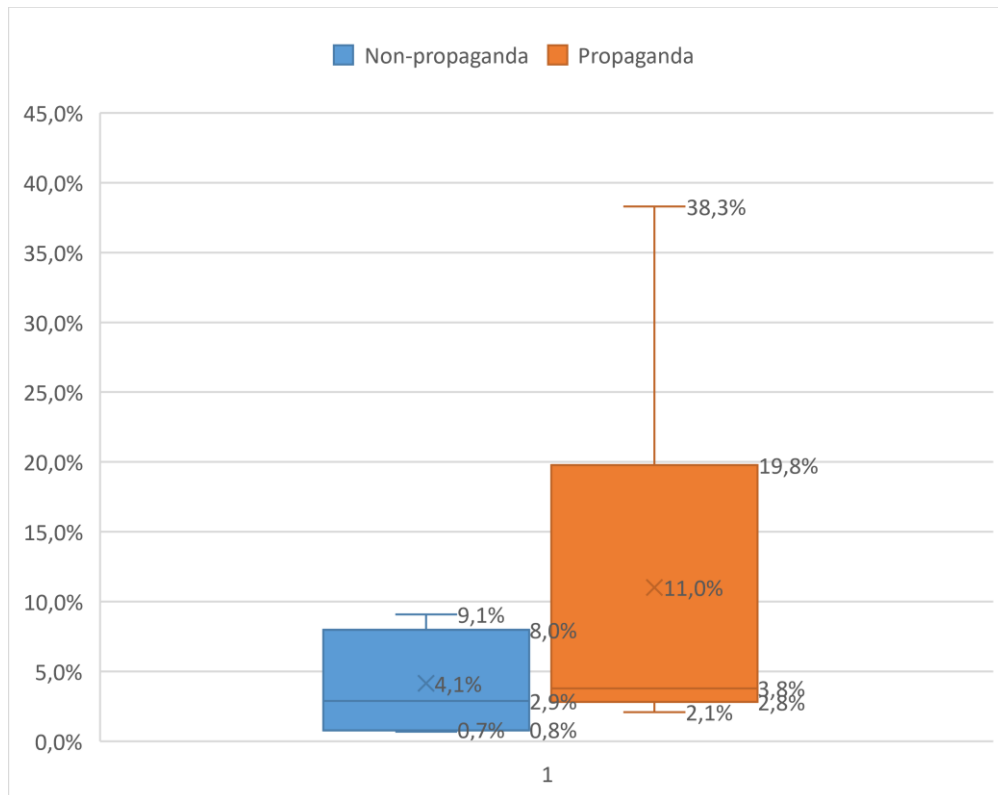


Figure1: Box chart to indicate the distribution of subjective (evaluative) nouns in each text group.

Herf's examples (2005: 54-56) of "non-euphemistic" and "nonmetaphorical" language in propaganda pertain to subjective terms, but with an accurate alignment with reality. Similar subjective examples are present in both groups of texts even though there are more subjective terms in the propaganda text group.

In examples (9) and (10) of the non-propaganda texts, nouns, namely 'scandal' and 'exposé', carry a value judgement. These examples are used in a sensationalistic way (whether journalistically correct or risky) to describe and judge a situation. Even though these terms have evaluative value, they still provide accurate descriptions of what is being discussed: the state capture story turned out to be a scandal and the *Mail & Guardian* paper played a role in exposing corruption at Nkandla.

In examples (11) and (12) the nouns '*kommunisme-bangmaakpraatjies*' [communism scare talk] and 'propaganda' are used, but these words form part of a direct quote and a passive construction, respectively. The noun choices in these examples can therefore be ascribed more directly to the original user of these terms and not as much to the author of the text giving a personal judgement on people or events (provided that the journalist is paraphrasing and quoting the speaker accurately).

In example (13) of the propaganda texts, the noun '*plundering*' [plundering] is used to refer to the manner in which taxpayers' money was used to upgrade the former president's Nkandla homestead with security and other features. The upgrade started with an initial, planned cost of R27 m (Public Protector South Africa 2014: 20) and ended with an amount of about R250 m. The loaded or subjective term 'plunder' can be regarded as an accurate description of what happened in reality. The same applies for examples (14) and (15): in example (14) the noun 'abuse' can similarly be understood as '*plundering*' [plundering], seeing that state resources were used for the security upgrades to the Nkandla homestead, which ended in the upgrading of other features as well, e.g., a clinic, an amphitheatre, a swimming pool and a chicken ramp (Public Protector South Africa 2014: 33-34). Keeping the above in mind, one could argue that the Nkandla events truly were a 'scandal' because the former president's gain, and the gain of other persons involved, was not declared and a formal investigation had to be launched by the Public Protector (see *Secure in comfort* 2014).

From a language perspective, the issue at hand is not that subjective terms are used in texts, whether they are an accurate depiction of reality or not, but that they are carefully

embedded by the propagandist in a text with a very specific aim. This could be a reason why certain accurate terms in propaganda are sometimes overlooked, as Herf (2005) mentions. The intra-textual but also intertextual embeddedness of propaganda terms makes it harder for the receiver of propaganda to discern whether a certain term is meant as abstract or concrete. As these terms are not loose-standing items, which are individually and carefully considered, it makes it hard for the receivers of propaganda to, first of all, identify them and, secondly, to identify which evaluative terms are those in line with reality and which are not. Being able to make such a distinction is important as it can help the receivers of propaganda to identify possible misinformation and possible efforts of manipulation.

There may also be a more psychological explanation for ignoring subjective but realistic terms regarding the effect that propaganda has on its receivers. Benkler *et al.* (2018) refer to this effect as “disorientation”. Disorientation entails that a propagandist unlinks an audience from its main sources of truth, e.g., academia, science and the media. “Left with nothing but this anomic disorientation, audiences can no longer tell truth from fiction, even if they want to. They are left with nothing but to choose statements that are ideologically congenial or mark them as members of the tribe” (Benkler *et al.* 2018: 36-37).

The importance of analysing and understanding how authors use evaluative language to achieve their goal with the created propaganda text is seated in the determinant nature of the aim of a propaganda text. The aim forms the main tipping point between whether a text is propaganda or non-propaganda, but will not be discussed here (see Jowett & O’Donnell 2012; Maritz 2019).

### ***3.2.3 Analysis according to propaganda techniques in propaganda texts***

By using different propaganda techniques, the way in which language is used to achieve these techniques can be made clear.

#### *Euphemism and mystification*

The following examples share properties of both euphemism and mystification: the true meaning is softened by selecting a specific term and, as a direct effect, the true semantic value is mystified.

(16) The officials who have gone public with inaccurate **information** must be censored like the **information** and description of the swimming pool as the fire **pool** ...

(Statement following release of Public Protector Final Report into security upgrades in Nkandla)

(17) ... like the information and description of the swimming pool as the fire pool and the details given to explain this matter constitute a **misrepresentation of facts**.

(Statement following release of Public Protector Final Report security upgrades in Nkandla)

Black (2001: 133) refers to abstract nouns that can often be associated with propaganda. Because the meaning of these nouns is flexible, they can be used to present something negative in a more agreeable way.

In example (16), the classifying adjective 'inaccurate' is used together with the abstract noun 'information' to, in a discrete way, refer to a lie that has been told by the officials involved. The "inaccurate information" refers to Zuma's swimming pool, which was renamed a "fire pool" in order to justify it as a security feature. The spokesperson for the ANC<sup>iii</sup> again refers to the same notion in the same text, but in a slightly different way, as can be seen in example (17) in the phrase "misrepresentation of facts". The necessity to actively use a euphemistic form can clearly be seen: by calling a lie "inaccurate information" or a "misrepresentation of facts" its true nature is obscured. Abstract nouns are therefore used in propaganda to hide important information from the receiver, but it still seems possible to discover the true meaning of the discussed examples. Although abstract, the meaning of these nouns is verifiable when a textual analysis is done.

### *Dysphemism*

Along with euphemism, another valuable technique in propaganda is dysphemism. Nouns with their high semantic potential can be used as structures to incorporate dysphemism into a propaganda text.

(18) He never hears the investor confidence-building messages of President Zuma which

the loony radicals castigate him for.

(Don't undermine Zuma's leadership)

(19) Derek Hanekom ... who is no better than a vile dog ... showed us his true colours – ...

(Edward Zuma open letter to Derek Hanekom and Pravin Gordhan)

(20) This **gutter** discourse, this show of ingrained white **paternalism** and condescending **sewer** talk against our native black **people** and their dispossession exposes Hanekom as another **Afrikaner** white master who sees Black Africans as no less than **hewers** of wood and **drawers** of water. Hanekom the white Afrikaner askari showed us clearly what he thinks of issues of black landlessness.

(Edward Zuma open letter to Derek Hanekom and Pravin Gordhan)

(21) *Eintlik kan ons, diegene wat belasting betaal, en wat besteel word nie eens regtig die vinger wys na die onverklaarbare optrede van die ANC se **stemvee** nie.*

'Actually, we, those who pay their taxes and those who are robbed, can't even point the finger to the inexplicable behaviour of the ANC's **voting herd**.'

(Nkandla: Die ware skuldiges)

Nouns have a “branding power” and one specific way in which to draw on this power is to label a person by using an ethnophaulism (Bolinger 1980: 79). In example (18), one of former president Zuma's political advisors is reacting on a text written by a political commentator who called on Zuma to be more careful about what he is saying in public as it can hurt the economy. By using the term “radicals”, Zuma's political advisor is placing potential opponents, including the said political commentator, in the same category. By portraying these individuals as being radical or extreme, Zuma's political advisor is trying to discredit them and, as a result, their critique on Zuma. Grouping these individuals by giving

them all the same derogative label, Zuma's political advisor is setting a norm that categorises any person challenging Zuma in a similar way.

In example (19), another derogatory term is chosen for an opponent. In this text, Zuma's son is targeting whistle blowers on state capture. Derek Hanekom and Pravin Gordhan were two ministers in his father's cabinet at the time that state capture was taking place. When it became clear that Zuma and the Gupta family were actively undermining the South African justice system, the discussed text was published as an open letter to Derek Hanekom and Pravin Gordhan in one of the last efforts to turn attention away from the true perpetrators.

In example (20) there are a number of nouns with an evaluative nature. By implementing these together in the text, Zuma's son is sketching Hanekom as a traitor; Hanekom is profiled as another white person who sees himself in the position of a "master" who therefore regards himself as being above black people. Black people are being positioned as the opposite, therefore slaves who are "hewers of wood and drawers of water".

In South Africa, the term 'Afrikaner' is a controversial term since it is used by white, Afrikaans-speaking people with ethnicity in mind. On the other hand, when it is sometimes used by a black person in a certain context, the term can be meant as a derogatory term with an ethnophobic value. When this term is combined with "askari", the negative connotations are amplified because "askari" means "a former resistance fighter who collaborated with the authorities during the apartheid regime" (Collins 2019). For a member of the ANC party, who fought against apartheid, this term implies great disloyalty.

In example (21) the noun "*stemvee*" [voting herd] is used to refer to the voters who voted for the ANC as ruling party. This noun is specifically picked by the propagandist in order to degrade this group of people to an animalistic level, with specific reference to the typical characteristic of a herd, namely to follow without thinking. The parallel is therefore drawn between the specific group of people who decided to vote for the ANC and a herd of animals, deciding without thinking. The propagandist later also speculates about whether the ANC's "*stemvee*" [voting herd] does not have the "*verstandelike kapasiteit*" [mental capacity] to "*onderskei*" [discern] between "*reg en verkeerd*" [right and wrong]. The word "*stemvee*" [voting herd] therefore becomes commentary on black people's intellectual capacity.



### *Self-dysphemism*

Dysphemism can be enforced by using a specific type of dysphemism, namely 'self-dysphemism', as it is called in this study.

(22) ... **K\*\*\*\*rs** who are subhuman ...

(Edward Zuma open letter to Derek Hanekom and Pravin Gordhan)

In this example, the propagandist is using the term "K\*\*\*\*rs" or kaffirs, which is a derogatory term for black persons, especially used during apartheid. By using this term, the propagandist is presenting his own group in a derogatory manner: he falsely implies that this term is either used for his target group by his opponent, Pravin Gordhan, or that it indicates the way Gordhan thinks about black people. The propagandist (Edward Zuma) is aiming to instil anger and elicit a negative reaction in his target audience by choosing this term to refer to them and channelling this anger towards his opponent.

This process of 'self-dysphemism' can be seen as a specific type of dysphemism where the propagandist is not attacking the opponent directly, but falsely representing and/or ascribing a negative belief held by the opponent. In the end the aim is the same as dysphemism, namely instilling negative emotions in the target group in order to direct these emotions towards the propagandist's opponent. In the case of self-dysphemism, the propagandist is not directing the target audience's negative emotions directly towards the opponent but, by first drawing their attention towards themselves, the evoked negative emotions are then directed towards the opponent.

### *Newspeak / neologisms*

(23) *Intussen baljaar die **perstitute** van Media24 met al die onthullings van agtergeblewe ANC-lede en ander mismaaksels ...*

'Meanwhile, the **presstitutes** of Media24 cavorts with all their revelations of disadvantaged ANC members and other miscreants ...'

(Mag Zuma nog 'n bietjie uithou)

(24) *Selfs die mees liggewig-Naarperskader, wat 'n redakteurspos beklee by een van hulle krimpende publikasies ...*

'Even the most **lightweight "Nauseous" press cadre**, who holds an editor's position at one of their shrinking publications ...'

(Nkandla: Die ware skuldiges)

(25) *'n Tweede vraagstuk, wat geen NSA-lofsinger of kruiperkaner sal durf vra nie ...*

'A second question, which no NSA praise singer or **bootlicker (Afri)kaner** will dare ask ...'

(Nkandla: Die ware skuldiges)

Auditory malapropisms, as explained by Bolinger (1980: 121), are used to communicate a specific, negative meaning and are also present in the analysed texts. The examples vary from an Afrikaans version of the word "*perstitute*" [presstitutes] (example (23)), to newer and context-specific words (examples (24) and (25)). In example (23) it is insinuated that the journalists of Media24 are "*perstitute*" [presstitutes], derived from the Afrikaans words for 'press' and 'prostitutes', which are similar in sound and form as their English counterparts. This word insinuates that the media, or a journalist, "misleadingly tailors news to fit a particular partisan agenda" (Wiktionary 2019). In this case, it would seem that the implied partisan is Naspers, a media group formerly known as *Die Nasionale Pers*, which can be translated to 'the national press'. Media24 is a media and publishing company which forms part of Naspers.

These neologisms (taking the form of a portmanteau) can be used to create new semantic values that work together: linking specific dysphemistic values to these words create the potential to label an opponent. When these values or associations stick to these terms, they always form part of the pool of potential semantic values that are recalled by the reader when the original terms are encountered in future. In example (24) the author chooses to use the term "*liggewig-Naarperskader*" [lightweight 'Nauseous' press cadre] when he refers to an alleged editor at one of the companies run by Naspers. He specifically

chooses to swop the first part of the name *Naspers* with the word “*Naarpers*”, a word similar in meaning to vomit, or being nauseous, and with a similar sound pattern to ‘Nas’. The author implies that a cadre of this specific institution disgusts him.

In example (25) the author uses the word “*kruiperkaner*” which is a portmanteau of “*kruiper*” [bootlicker] and “*Afrikaner*” (term for white South Africans) omitting ‘Afri’, which provides the space to create a new name for some Afrikaners, implying weakness and an unwillingness to stand firmly. By using these nouns, the author is in a sense using self-dysphemism by making people of his own ethnic group seem weak if they do not conform to his preferred manner of reaction towards certain events in the country. Positions other than the author’s own position are viewed as unfavourable even though no good reasons are provided for this stance. It might be an active attempt by the propagandist to distance himself as a ‘true’ Afrikaner from the so-called “*kruiperkaners*”.

Similar self-dysphemistic nouns are used by the pro-Zuma camp. Edward Zuma, for example, creates the noun collocations “white-minority-capital kith and kin network” and “white monopoly capital stooge” to refer to his father’s opponents, semantically linking them with the discourse created by Bell Pottinger in order to deflect attention away from Zuma and the Guptas.

Neologisms or partial neologisms can be placed under the umbrella term ‘Newspeak’, as the creator is actively changing the semantics of words by adding certain meanings and, in effect, taking meaning away.

#### *Repetition (lexical cohesion)*

By repeating the same nouns in a text, selected pieces of information are emphasised to the reader. In the DA<sup>iv</sup>-generated text *Nkandla: Zuma must personally pay R63.9 million in fringe benefits tax and release tax records*, the word ‘corruption’ is, for example, used eight times in the text. The reader is not necessarily always conscious of the repetition in a text as these repetitive forms are often spread throughout the text.

(26) This war against **corruption** is far from over.

(27) Only a DA government can stop **corruption** and ensure that jobs are created and quality services delivered to our people.

In the examples above, an underlying and continuous message of a) labelling the ANC as being corrupt, b) corruption as an enemy, and c) the DA as heroes and corruption fighters, are introduced to the reader throughout the text. Nouns' semantic potential in combination with repetition can help the propagandist to create slogan-like forms, creating an immediate association with the propagandist's cause.

*Slogans, Newspeak (lexical hardening and adjusting semantic values)*

(28) This is what he and his **white-minority-capital** kith and kin network really talk about

...

(29) ... **wants natives to be perennially marginalised** and always eat the left-overs dished by Indians and the **white minority** and its **capital** network ...

(30) I find it personally revulsive that the anti-majoritarian **sell out minority** in the ANC in the form of Derek Hanekom & Pravin Gordhan have brazenly and unabashedly spoke out against the **majority** elected ANC and South African President, Jacob Zuma, on various **white monopoly capital** media platforms.

The examples above come from the text *Edward Zuma open letter to Derek Hanekom and Pravin Gordhan*, and show variations of the same concepts, especially that of "white monopoly capital". There are six combinations of the phrase 'white monopoly capital' in this text and three with the phrase 'economic transformation'. The combination of these terms is used as a type of slogan with the effect that, when these terms are encountered individually, they still recall the larger collocation, slogan and therefore the propagandist's cause. In this way, old and conventional definitions are dressed with new and alternative meanings. An aspect of the propaganda technique 'Newspeak' comes to the fore again as new terms (or in this case collocations) are created and as semantic manipulation takes place. Certain individual, specific lexical items become representative of the collocation in a metonymic way. In turn, the collocation becomes representative of the larger discourse.

Emphasis is placed on "minority" and "majority" (see examples (28), (29) and (30)) as contrary to each other and, in doing so, polarisation is brought about. The word 'minority' is used as a type of subsidiary in the collocation for the noun 'monopoly', which has the effect

of emphasising 'majority' and, in doing so, clearly indicating which cultural group is meant with the word 'minority'. In example (29), specific emphasis is placed on a specific time perspective, namely the historic disadvantage of black people, among others, during apartheid in South Africa. In doing so, the country's economic problems become an extra interpretation frame, supporting the general discourse in the text.

These similar slogan-collocations are not exclusive to propaganda, but are also present in non-propaganda texts, for example "Gupta leaks", "the Zuptas", "white monopoly capital" and "white-owned businesses". These terms are all present in the non-propaganda text *Zuma no-confidence vote: Will 'the Zuptas' fall in South Africa?* Its aim is to communicate and contextualise the state capture events in South Africa to an international audience and it therefore uses familiar terms that form part of a discourse associated with the situation at hand. The term 'Zuptas' is also specifically mentioned and its use is qualified in the text.

Specific types of discourse, as with the slogan "white monopoly capital", are often created in order to deflect attention from a propagandist's questionable decisions and actions.

### *Deflection*

- (31) The Guptas also deny wrongdoing, and say they are **victims** of racism and xenophobia.

(Zuma no-confidence vote: Will 'the Zuptas' fall in South Africa?)

- (32) ... constant rubbish of saying that **white Monopoly Capital** and **Radical Economic Transformation** are Bell Pottinger phrases crafted in London ...

(Edward Zuma open letter to Derek Hanekom and Pravin Gordhan)

- (33) *Nietemin het 'n meerderheid van blanke kiesers in 1992 ons ore uitgeleen aan die pers se **propaganda** en die Nasionale Party se leuens, en 'ja' gestem.*

'Nonetheless, a majority of white voters lent our ears in 1992 to the **propaganda** of the press and the National Party's lies, and voted 'yes.'

Example (31) shows a form of deflection, but as presented in a non-propaganda text by indirectly quoting the Guptas. The Guptas implemented deflection by reversing the allegations and implied guilt by actively portraying themselves as victims of racism and xenophobia. In example (32), deflection is used to cover up a lie, which proved to be the truth: Gordhan is presented as a liar when the contrary is true. In example (33) the word “propaganda” is used to present the media as being guilty thereof when the author is guilty of this very same allegation. By implying that another party is guilty, the author is actively turning negative attention away from himself by focusing attention on another group’s ‘guilt’. It seems as if the author uses nouns to direct the focus of the target audience to strategic points in order for him to hide his own guilt.

To summarise, it is clear that, apart from abstract nouns, concrete nouns can also fulfil an important role in propaganda. Subjective nouns can be chosen by the propagandist for their semantic ‘loadedness’ and can, separately or as part of a phrase, be used to label specific parties in order to create dysphemism, for example, the use of “*stemvee*” [voting herd] or “white monopoly capitalist offspring”. A noun collocation, often including a subjective adjective, can readily be used by itself to emphasise a certain idea. In this way a specific semantic notion is highlighted in an accumulative way from one lexical item to the following. A propagandist can also use self-dysphemism to let the target group feel attacked and, in doing so, create a specific emotion in the group in order to win the group’s support for the propagandist’s cause.

Repetition, and with it, emphasis, can further be incorporated in a text, for example by repeating the noun ‘corruption’. In this way, a propagandist creates a collective enemy, from whom the target audience needs ‘deliverance’, and they will therefore need to turn to a hero, namely the propagandist. The way in which metaphors play a central role in propaganda can be investigated in future.

Sometimes an idea in a propaganda text can be emphasised with the help of lexical cohesion by choosing associated terms, for example, ‘white monopoly capital’ and ‘white minority capital’. Repetition of certain concepts and certain collocations can also result in

something similar to slogans with the help of semantic shifts, which also links to a specific dimension of Newspeak.

With the help of Newspeak, new terms such as 'fire pool' can be used to hide something, with the help of euphemism and mystification. Euphemism can also be integrated with nouns, for example by referring to a 'misrepresentation of facts' instead of using more accurate nouns such as 'lies'. In certain non-propaganda texts, similar terms are present, but it is often the result of terms which already exist in the local vernacular and not necessarily, as in propaganda, the other way around. In the discourse regarding white monopoly capital, there is often reference to the time in the country when there was a greater economic discrepancy between black and white people. A certain time perspective, in this case the apartheid era, is often emphasised in order to instil negative emotions in the reader or target group.

Nouns also play an important role in creating deflection, namely by suggesting that the opponent is the guilty party and, in doing so, turning the reader's eyes away from the true perpetrators.

#### **4. Conclusion**

The purpose of this study was to identify how propaganda is expressed through nouns by using a formal linguistic approach. The following research questions were asked: What is the role that nouns play in realising propaganda techniques? How do the findings compare with the known functions of nouns in propaganda, as identified in the existing literature?

When adopting a more formal linguistic approach to establish the linguistic properties of propaganda, nouns form a valuable linguistic tool in the propagandist's hand. Although nouns are approached and analysed separately in this article, it is important to note that the different linguistic elements in any text, and especially in a propaganda text, work together to achieve the aim of the propagandist. As illustrated in the article and by nature of the linguistic items, adjectives and nouns have an important semantic role to play together. The role of adjectives and the collocative nature of adjectives and nouns are addressed in the larger research project.

This interdependent relation between the different word elements in propaganda texts may be one of the indicators why some evaluative terms, as pointed out by Herf (2005), are not always taken seriously by the receiver. Because these terms would have stood out in his

examples as being horrific when taken in isolation, they might have been so integrated in the larger propagandistic discourse at the time of use, that the receiving target audience might have been deprived of discernment between what to take as being in line with reality, and what not. From a language perspective, Herf's anticipation that concrete terms are sometimes used, but overlooked in propaganda, is confirmed when considering the way in which concrete, subjective nouns are used.

When objective nouns in non-propaganda and propaganda texts are compared, they fulfil the ideational metafunction in both text groups and are therefore similar. However, there are 7,3% more objective nouns in non-propaganda texts. When subjective nouns are compared between these text groups, these nouns have a higher presence in propaganda texts with 7,3% more in this text group. Propagandists choose these forms in order to invite the receiver of the communication to join their perspective on things, therefore counting on the interpersonal metafunction of language to do so. If the receiver joins the propagandists' perspective, propagandists can attain their goal with greater ease.

Although there is a similarity in the way in which subjective nouns are used in both propaganda texts and non-propaganda texts, since they can be true representations of reality, the presence of subjective nouns is often used in non-propaganda texts as part of paraphrasing or quoting external sources, therefore not as directly representative of the authors personal voice in the text.

Some of the salient propaganda techniques associated with the use of nouns in propaganda texts were pointed out in the literature and can be confirmed by this study. These comprise euphemism and mystification, dysphemism and Newspeak, which includes neologisms. When using a euphemism, the propagandist is trying to conceal specific information.

Dysphemism has a sub-category, namely 'self-dysphemism'. This term can be seen as a specific type of dysphemism where the propagandist does not attack the opponent directly, but falsely presents a negative belief, allegedly held by the opponent. In the end the aim is the same as dysphemism, namely instilling negative emotions in the target group in order to direct these emotions towards the propagandist's opponent. Self-dysphemism can also be used in order to deflect attention away from the propagandist him- or herself.

Nouns can be used to polarise things or parties by setting them up as opposites, for example, referring to 'minority' and 'majority' in the same text. By presenting certain parties



as being guilty of something, a propagandist can use nouns, or nouns in a larger discourse, to deflect attention away from the propagandist's own guilt. Noun collocations can be used to form neologisms, which can even be used as types of slogans, employed by a propagandist to build out a specific discourse. The implication is that shortened versions of a collocation later perform a type of metonymic effect. When the target audience is, for example, confronted with the word 'capital' at a later stage, a semantic link is already in place, recalling the larger collocation 'white monopoly capital'.

Collocations can also be used to add different semantic values, changing the conventional way of understanding a word, which ties in with the concept of Newspeak. New semantic values can also be created with the help of auditory malapropisms, as suggested by Bolinger (1980). These noun neologisms are often used to label an opponent and can even be used to create self-dysphemism, for example when the author calls someone of his own ethnic group a "*kruiperkaner*" (bootlicker Afrikaner). This specific type of self-dysphemism shares a link with ethnonyms. Lexical cohesion can also be used to emphasise certain ideas, especially with the help of evaluative terms or neologisms, in order to normalise or conventionalise the term. It could also be used to create a feeling of guilt in the propagandist's own target group or create a sense of fear, seeing that individuals are afraid of being labelled and branded as the weakling in the group.

Black's (2001) anticipation that abstract nouns, for example "inaccurate information", are preferred by propagandists, is valid. However, stating that they are unverified or unverifiable cannot be proved because the meaning of such terms becomes verifiable after a thorough analysis of the text.

The combinatory value that nouns present to the propagandist in order to incorporate more than one propaganda technique can be observed when, for example, euphemism and mystification is used together in order to create a misrepresentation of reality. Dysphemism can be used to create a diversion, implementing a deflection technique.

A better understanding of the linguistic properties of propaganda can provide a tool with which to identify and analyse propaganda more accurately in future.

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<sup>ii</sup> Non-propaganda texts are texts that do not only or mainly seek to attain the author's personal aim and are true in its communicative purpose (compare Pieper, 1988: 15-22).

<sup>iii</sup> The ANC is the African National Congress political party, which has been the ruling party in South Africa since 1994, when the Apartheid regime ended.

<sup>iv</sup> The DA is the Democratic Alliance political party, which serves as the official opposition party to the ANC.