Understanding the Language of Persuasion

Medium: *A form of communication; a storytelling environment.*

Media Education: *An educational approach that gives media users greater freedom and choice by teaching how to access, analyze, evaluate and produce media.*

1. Symbolism: Persuading through the use of an idea-conveyance (like the Nike Swooshtika or a U.S. flag pin on a politician's suit or dress) that transmits power by associating one thing (said politician) with another (support for his speeches or her policies). Symbols can be images (the famous "Earth seen from Space" photo), phrases ("Just Do It"), graphic brands (The Golden Arches) or icons (well-known sports figures or actresses). Symbols are rarely used by accident or chance; they are usually employed very carefully.

2. Big Lie: Persuading through lying, fabrication, or dishonesty; not telling the truth about X. An easy technique to spot in advertising ("Smoking makes you sexy; Drinking makes you glamorous") but sometimes harder to spot in political propaganda. Critically reading and thinking about a variety of different independent media sources is handy in flushing out the Big Lie.

3. Flattery: Persuading by complimenting insincerely or excessively. "You deserve a break today," say advertisers, so-called "reality TV" suggests that the viewing audience is more smart, cool, or hip than the real people on the screen, and politicians always claim that they know "what the American people want." All three examples are forms of flattery.

4. Hyperbole: Persuading by making exaggerated claims. Found all the time in advertising (The best smoke/truck/drink/laundry detergent ever!) and often in political propaganda ("My opponent is "'no Jack Kennedy.'")

5. Bribery: Persuading through the use of a bribe – money, a favor, some savings, or a little something extra. Examples: "Buy this Electro-Juicer in the next 24 seconds and we'll throw in extra lemons and knock off an extra 20% from the total cost," or "Vote for me and I'll return all parole'd felons to prison.")

6. Bandwagon: Persuading by insisting that "everyone's doing it/X." Works in both advertising and political propaganda. In middle school, we called it "peer pressure," remember?

7. Scapegoating: Persuading by blaming problems on one individual or group (The Nazis blaming Jews for Germany's problems during the 1930s, and Americans attacking Muslims after 9/11 are two historical examples).

8. Simple Solutions: Persuading by offering an easy solution to either a manufactured or more complex problem. (Examples: "We can solve America's immigration problem by building a giant 8-foot-tall wall from California to Florida." "Take this pill/shake/drug and lose all the weight you want!")

9. Rhetorical Questions: Persuading through the asking of questions designed to frame the conversation or steer audiences towards a certain predicted response. ("Do you want greasy oily hair?" Why did politician X lie about Y?")

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10. **Straw Man:** Persuading by setting up your opponent's (weak) argument and then blowing it over with your own (stronger) argument. (Famous political example: "While my political opponent X argues that the Iraq War is misguided, it is clear that the U.S. invasion of Iraq was vital to destroy weapons of mass destruction, overthrow the corrupt Saddam Hussein regime, and liberate Iraq from emerging terrorist groups.")

11. **Defensive Nationalism:** Persuading by appealing to a real or imagined enemy: Communists, terrorists, "godless" liberals, "crazy" conservatives etc.

12. **Humor:** Persuading through appeals to the funny bone. When we are laughing, we are not necessarily _____.

13. **Testimonial:** Persuading with the support of famous individuals (athletes, pop stars, celebrated citizens) or respected institutions (like, say, the Action Coalition for Media Education.)

14. **Plain Folks:** The opposite of testimonial, persuading by appealing to "the common person" and portraying a product, politician or service as "just one of the guys/gals." Watch any Bud Light advertisement, or millionaire politicians campaign during election season.

15. **Repetition:** Persuading through repeating the same image, word, phrase or symbol over and over and over and over. Repetition works. And works.

16. **Nostalgia:** Persuading through appeals to a more simple, romantic, idealized, even mythical past. Ask your grandparents about life when they were kids, and look for production techniques that are clear "nostalgia" giveaways – old timey music, sepia-toned filters, romantic historical remembrances, and "life was so much simpler back then" wistfulness.

17. **Diversion:** Persuading by diverting attention away from damning information or an alternative point of view. The alcohol and tobacco industries use this technique in ALL of their advertising propaganda, and politicians will often try and distract citizens from thinking for themselves.

18. **Denial:** Not just a river in Egypt, denial is persuading by avoiding or seeming to avoid an attachment to unpleasant symbols, moments, or stories.

19. **Warm Fuzzies:** Persuading by appeals to cute little children, large fuzzy animals, colorful cartoon characters, or anything else that warms your heart and makes you go "Awwww." What examples can you think of?

20. **Beautiful People:** Persuading through images of good-looking people to sell products, lifestyles, behaviors, or ideas. They need not have anything in common. Common in advertising and politics.

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21. Group Dynamics: Persuading by building a sense of "we are in this together" solidarity; replacing the "I" aloneness with "We" togetherness. Look for "we," "us," "our," and other power words that create a feeling of togetherness. (A classic example: "We The People," begins the U.S. Constitution. Adverts, meanwhile, often display ordinary people [actors all] bonding together over the shared experience of eating X yogurt/drinking Y soda/ driving Z car, etc.)

22. Either/Or: Persuading by appeals to simplistic black-and-white thinking. Used all the time by lazy "news" magazines and our mind-numbingly shallow McNews culture. (Two examples: "Hillary Clinton: Heroine or Bonehead?" "Do you live in a Red state or a Blue state?")

23. Maybe: Persuading with promising but "hedgy" language – look for words like "might," "maybe" or "could." (Example: "Play the Lottery! You may/might/could win 1 million dollars!")

24. Strength: Persuading by appeals to strong leadership – be firm, aggressive, bold, and "in charge." Watch an action movie or State of the Union presidential speech for examples.

25. Scientific Evidence: Persuading with scientific or pseudo-scientific language: graphs, charts, diagrams, statistics, and "jargon." (See Al Gore's film An Inconvenient Truth or Climate Denier rebuttals for examples, or look at the jargon of any beauty product advertisement.)

26. Card Stacking: Persuading by taking information out of context or not providing the whole story. Movie advertising featuring movie reviewers' one liners – "the best movie I've ever scene!" – uses this technique all the time.

27. Name Calling: Persuading with "ad hominem" (to the person) attacks that feature colorful, crude, offensive or humorous language. (Examples; shock jock radio, Sunday morning talk/shout shows, and so-called reality TV programs.)

28. The Race Card: Persuading through appeals to race, often mythical notions of racial harmony in advertising (See United Colors of Benetton) or race-based fear appeals (look for coded spoken or visual language in political election season TV adverts).

29. Anaphora: Persuading by repeating a word or phrase at the START of successive clauses or sentences, like layering one brick on top of another. (Examples: Listen to Barack Obama's speeches).

30. Epistrophe: Persuading by repeating a word or phrase at the END of successive clauses or sentences, like layering one brick on top of another. (Examples: Listen to Barack Obama's speeches).

31. Timing: Persuading through combining various production and persuasive techniques to enhance a medium/story's meaning and power. (Study scary or tear-jerking movie scenes, or powerful advertisements or political speeches, to see this at work.)

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