

# The Ministry of Information and the linguistic design of Britain's World War II propaganda

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Paper for **Discourse & Society**

**The Ministry of Information and the linguistic design of Britain's World War II propaganda: what archival documents can tell us about political discourse**

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# **The Ministry of Information and the linguistic design of Britain's World War II propaganda: what archival documents can tell us about political discourse**

## **Abstract**

This paper argues that metalinguistic documents in historical archives are a useful source for political discourse analysts to explore. With reference to the archives of the British Ministry of Information in World War II, it shows that such documents are revealing of the orders of discourse and the language ideologies that contribute to the production of political discourse. Archival documents can help us to understand the ways in which political actors conceive of their linguistic strategies that are typically the focus of our discourse analytic work. In a field which places great theoretical emphasis on the contextual significance of political language, archival documents thus represent a crucial, but hitherto overlooked, source of evidence. More specifically, the paper demonstrates that the Ministry of Information's civil servants paid a great deal of attention to language, working in highly reflexive ways to produce their discourse, and that one of the linguistic strategies that was particularly intensely discussed was the use of informal and personalised language. Those civil servants were working on a 'synthetically personalised' language half a century before discourse analysts began paying sustained attention to such a strategy.

## **Keywords**

*political discourse analysis, metalanguage, informalization, technologisation, synthetic personalisation, propaganda, World War II*

## **Autobiographical Note**

Joe Spencer-Bennett (previously Bennett) is a Senior Lecturer in Applied Linguistics in the Department of English Language and Linguistics at the University of Birmingham, where he is director of undergraduate programmes in English Language and Linguistics. His research concerns the political and ethical life of language, especially in recent British history. His book *Moral Talk* was published by Routledge in 2018, and he has published in journals such as *Discourse & Society*, *Journal of Sociolinguistics* and *Language & Communication*.

# **The Ministry of Information and the design of Britain's World War II propaganda: what archival documents can tell us about political discourse**

## **1. Introduction**

Political discourse analysis is concerned with the significance of language in political practice. It addresses this concern through detailed analysis of the linguistic strategies used by political actors (e.g. Van Dijk 1997, Chilton 2004, Wodak 2009, Fairclough and Fairclough 2012). It does not, however, place much emphasis on the ways in which those actors think or talk about their linguistic strategies. While political discourse analysis is well able to identify linguistic patterns in political discourse, it is less well-attuned to questions about who developed those patterns, how those patterns were decided on, what other patterns were considered but not used, and so on. In short, it is relatively insensitive to a whole set of concerns to do with the significance of linguistic phenomena for political actors themselves. To address this problem, this paper suggests that the investigation of political *metalanguage*<sup>i</sup> should have a prominent place in the political discourse analytic toolkit. The 'folk linguistics' (Niedzielski and Preston 2003) of political actors should be a major research priority. Of course, even allowing for this as a theoretical priority, the practices of the 'folk' who produce political discourse are difficult for linguistic researchers to access, and this presents a problem. But if we are willing to make greater use of historical studies, there exists a great wealth of political metalanguage to be investigated, in such sources as memoirs, interviews, and – the focus of this paper – historical archives.

The investigation of political metalanguage allows us to address two broad sets of questions, both of which are theoretically important but, in practice, overlooked in political discourse analysis. First, how do political actors, in whatever context, go about making their linguistic decisions, and what linguistic phenomena do they attend to in doing so? Second, what conceptions of language, and its political uses, enter into the decisions they make; that is, what 'language ideologies' (Joseph and Taylor 1990, Woolard and Schieffelin 1994) inform the production of political discourse? These questions are likely to have very different answers in different political and historical contexts, and the aim of this paper is not to provide definitive answers that hold across all contexts. Rather it is to demonstrate that orienting ourselves to these questions, and collecting and investigating the metalinguistic data

that helps to answer them, makes an important contribution to our understanding of political discourse.

The particular study that I present looks at the linguistic planning undertaken by the British Government in 1939 as part of their preparations for World War II. In the run-up to the war, and in its early phases, the British government were concerned about the ‘morale’ of British citizens. A Ministry of Information was established, and among its many tasks was that of monitoring morale and producing propaganda to boost that morale (McLaine 1979). The Ministry was formally established on 4<sup>th</sup> September 1939, the day after Britain and France declared war on Germany, but civil servants had quietly been working on Ministry business for some time before that. Much of their work, even before the outbreak of war, involved planning the ways in which the Government, through the Ministry, could best communicate with British citizens. A large number of documents relating to that metalinguistic planning are available for inspection at the National Archives in Kew, West London, and I present an investigation of what those documents have to tell us about the design of the Ministry’s political discourse.

In the section that follows this, I provide a brief account of political discourse analysis and its aims, in order to show, in principle, that a concern with the metalinguistic work of political actors helps to address these aims. I then outline the archival documents on which the paper is based, before discussing what those documents shows about how the Ministry of Information’s propagandists went about making their linguistic decisions, and the metalinguistic ideas which informed those decisions. I show that their linguistic decisions took place within an order of discourse (Foucault 1981, Fairclough 2015) which placed great emphasis on linguistic reflexivity, on drafting and redrafting, on seeking expert advice, and on assessing the effectiveness of particular linguistic strategies – down to the level of particular words and phrases. Further, those decisions were shaped by a language ideological tension between two conceptions of what political language should look like: on the one hand, the view that it should be authoritative, distant, and formal; and on the other, an emergent view that it should be colloquial and informal, seeking to linguistically bridge the ‘gulf’ between government and citizens. The Ministry was thus explicitly engaged in debates about what would later be called the ‘informalisation’ or even ‘synthetic personalisation’ of political English (Pearce 2005, Mair 2006, Farrelly and Seoane 2012, Fairclough 2015).

## 2. Political Discourse Analysis and the Metalinguistic Context

There is no one version of political discourse analysis that all researchers in the field adhere to. Van Dijk (1997) sets out a formative and relatively unified account of the field, while Fairclough and Fairclough (2012: 20-25) compare a few differing frameworks (Chilton 2004, Wodak 2009). However, there are a few quite general points of agreement among the diverse researchers in the field, and I will structure this brief account according to three such points. I will suggest that, in relation to each of these points, developing a greater understanding of the ways in which political actors conceive of political discourse – what we might call the ‘metalinguistic context’ – is likely to represent a useful step forward in political discourse analytic work.

First, political discourse analysis takes the *discourse* of political actors as its central object of analysis. The primary concern of political discourse analysis is the things that political actors say and write, their ‘language in use’ (Brown and Yule 1983: 1)<sup>ii</sup>. More specifically, and in contrast to most studies in political rhetoric (Martin 2015, Atkins et al. 2014), it analyses that discourse in terms of its linguistic (or more broadly semiotic) properties. Partington and Taylor (2018), for instance, encourage students of political persuasion to look for such things as modality, metaphors, question-answer pairs, personal pronouns, all linguistic phenomena which might equally be central to investigations of discourse in other fields. Taking this approach avoids treating politics as a linguistic special case of some kind, provides a defence against criticisms of subjective interpretation, and allows political discourse analysts to root their claims about political communication in attested claims about communication more generally (see Atkinson 1984: 181-182). However, political discourse analysis sometimes suggests that the linguistic phenomena it takes as its focus are accessible *only* via the use of systematic linguistic analysis. For instance, the journal *Discourse & Society* instructs authors that ‘Articles should focus on specific structures or strategies of discourse that are not self-evident to the casual reader’ (Van Dijk 2019). But this category of ‘casual reader’ might include an extremely wide range of people involved in the production, mediation and reception of political discourse, including, for example, political orators, speechwriters, government information officer, journalists, various audiences among the public (Paveau 2011). The question of whether particular ‘structures or strategies’ are ‘self-evident’ to any of these people or not is one that is rarely, if ever, directly addressed.

A second feature of political discourse analysis is that, it seeks to place its analysis in *context*. Political discourse analysts tend to work in traditions of linguistics which can broadly be called ‘functional’. Such traditions see language as a thing that people *do*, rather than simply as a thing they *have*, and they understand that act of doing in terms of its contextual motivations and significance (e.g. Halliday 1978). On this point, as is well-known, politically oriented approaches to discourse have been subject to a good deal of criticism. Such criticism says that discourse analysts, in practice, have little to say about either the production of that discourse or its reception (e.g. Stubbs 1997, Jörgensen and Phillips 2002). Although – or perhaps *because* – political discourse analysts work with a theory of linguistic phenomena as motivated by functional considerations, they tend not to see the direct investigation of the significance of those phenomena to people involved in political practice as a central part of the approach. While various forms of audience design research have, to some extent addressed this criticism on the reception side (e.g. Richardson 1998, Llewelyn and Harrison 2006, Fuoli and Hart 2018), it is an objection which still has considerable force when it comes to our understanding of the production of political discourse. The producers of political discourse are theorised, to a degree; for Van Dijk, they are ‘elites’, specifically ‘symbolic elites’ with ‘symbolic power, that is, preferential access to, or control over public discourse’ (2008: 14, following Bourdieu 1991). But political discourse analysis has had little directly to say about how these elites are actually constituted, or how they make decisions about how to wield their symbolic power. Van Dijk writes that his conception of elite control over discourse is ‘very general’ and that ‘it is one of the tasks of CDA to spell out these forms of power’ (2008: 96). Empirically, this task has hardly begun.

Within the broad field of political discourse analysis, the approach which places greatest emphasis on the contextual significance of linguistic phenomena – and specifically on *historical* context – is the discourse-historical approach, developed by Wodak and others (e.g. Wodak et al. 1999, Wodak 2001, Benke and Wodak 2003, Wodak 2009). For Wodak, discourse ‘cannot be adequately interpreted, understood or even explained if one does not approach [context] in ... a complex multidisciplinary way’ (2003: 121). To achieve this sophisticated understanding of context, Wodak advocates ‘fieldwork and ethnography’ and ‘sampl[ing] information about the co- and context of the text (social, political, historical, psychological, and so on)’ (2001: 69, 93). This complex contextual knowledge helps us to make sense of, and indeed to identify, the linguistic strategies deployed by language users, and the particular linguistic means by which those strategies are achieved<sup>iii</sup>. However, it

remains the case that the discourse-historical approach pays little attention to the specifically *metalinguistic* aspects of that context, to the ways in which political actors conceive of the linguistic strategies and means they adopt. In common with other approaches to political discourse analysis, documentation of political actors' metalinguistic work seems not to be much sought after. We therefore know little about a particular aspect of the historical context which, it might be thought, would be central to the concerns of political discourse analysts: the ways in which political actors have conceived of the language that they use.

Third, and finally, political discourse analysis seeks to be *politically useful*. The aim is to analyse language in order to contribute to our understanding of politics. For researchers who are also critical discourse analysts, political discourse analysis tends to share the critical aims of the latter field, and therefore to be concerned with addressing discursive power abuses (Van Dijk 1997, Fairclough and Fairclough 2012). Even for those who are not concerned with critique in this sense, the aim of political discourse analysis is generally to raise awareness of the political significance of language. Partington and Taylor, for instance, write that 'only very careful attention to language and the ways it is used can help us appreciate, exploit and protect ourselves from the art of persuasion' (2018: 235), and is therefore important for our lives as politically astute citizens. However, political discourse analysis has tended to proceed without collecting direct evidence of the ways in which language might *already* be a matter of concern for those involved in politics. If we are to see our discourse analytic work as identifying the linguistic strategies used by symbolic elites, then it is likely to be useful to know the extent to which those elites are already aware of these strategies. A form of analysis which purports to identify phenomena of which political actors are already well aware may look somewhat politically naïve. Further, for the citizen audience of political discourse, it is important to know not only what political actors are doing with language, but also what they are *aiming* to do with it and why. Documentation of political actors' metalinguistic decision making will not, of course, provide an exhaustive or infallible record of either of these things, but it is nonetheless likely to help us to develop on the knowledge that we currently gain from our text analyses and collection of broader contextual information.

One way of characterising political discourse analysis as it is currently constituted would be to say that it has much to say about political *discourse*, i.e. 'actual [political] talk or writing', but less to say about political *orders of discourse*, i.e. the ways in which production of that



discourse is arranged in committee meetings, drafts, reports, informal discussions, who is involved in those practices, and what powers those people and practices have (Fairclough 2015: 60-53, drawing on Foucault, e.g. 1981). The discourse on which we concentrate is the tip of a discursive iceberg, and we know little about what happens underwater, or ‘backstage’ to shift to Goffman’s metaphor (1969). Our conception of political actors as symbolic elites tends to remain at a very general level, as Van Dijk points out. So one question that arises is: what can we find out about the order of discourse within which political discourse is produced? How do political actors go about making their linguistic decisions, and within what institutional arrangements do they do so?

Political discourse analysis could, I contend, usefully build on approaches to the politics of language adopted in sociolinguistics, historical linguistics and especially linguistic anthropology (e.g. Cameron 1995, Mugglestone 2003, Crowley 2003, Agha 2007, Hill 2009, Silverstein 2011, Heller and McElhinney 2017). Such approaches use naturalistic sources of so-called ‘folk’ metalanguage to investigate how particular forms, uses, and varieties of language have been conceived in particular times, places and institutions. Just like other people, political actors have to make use of particular ideas about how language works, about what means what, and about what is effective and what is not. The ‘elites’ of political discourse analysis are also the ‘folk’ of linguistic anthropology, and we might ask what ideas about language inform their exercise of symbolic power.

### **3. The Ministry of Information’s metalanguage**

In order to address the concern with political actors’ conceptions of language outlined above, I discuss a particular historical episode, the linguistic planning of the British Ministry of Information in the lead-up to, and early phases of, World War II. From the outset of the Ministry’s planning – including for several months before the Ministry was officially established in September 1939 – the production of political language was a major concern. The files of the Ministry and its planning process are held along with other government documents, at the National Archives in Kew, West London. These files have been explored by others with an interest in the institutional history of the organisation (McLaine 1979, Grant 1994) and in the design of World War II propaganda<sup>iv</sup> more generally (Lewis 2017), but their potential to reveal the specifically *linguistic* planning of the Ministry’s materials has not been considered. Nor have linguists and discourse analysts made the most of the more general capacity of such archives to shed light on the planning of political language.

I visited the National Archives on a number of occasions in early 2019 and investigated a range of files within the INF 1 series, which contains documents from the Ministry of Information. Within this large set of files, most of the material concerning linguistic planning comes from a few particular sources. Those are: minutes of meetings of the ‘International propaganda and Broadcasting Inquiry, Home Committee’ in April and May of 1939 (INF1/720); memoranda concerning slogans for the Ministry’s first poster campaign, i.e. ‘Outdoor Publicity’, from May 1939 (INF1/723); memoranda and drafts relating to leaflets and newsletters from between May and July 1939 (INF1/721 and INF1/722); and letters and memoranda concerning the printing of posters between June and September 1939 (INF 1/226). These materials largely relate to the activities of a committee first known as the ‘Home Section’ of the ‘International Propaganda and Broadcasting Enquiry’, and then from June 1939, as ‘Ministry of Information. Publicity Division: Planning Section’ (note the shift from ‘propaganda’ to ‘publicity’). Other files come from the archives of Mass-Observation, a social research organisation which was commissioned by the Ministry of Information between 1939 and 1941 to provide information on civilian morale, and, most pertinently, on the public’s reception of the Ministry’s propaganda (Highmore 2002, Hinton 2013). Mass-Observation produced a large number of reports for the Ministry of Information, and these reports are available through the Adam Matthew digital archive (Adam Matthew Digital 2019)<sup>v</sup> and at the Keep at the University of Sussex.

Alongside this material from the National Archives and the Mass-Observation archive, I have made use of secondary sources, in particular to shed light on the broader institutional context (e.g. Calder 1969, Balfour 1979, McLaine 1979, Grant 1994). Indeed, for British historians of the twentieth century, the broad story of the Ministry of Information is well-known, and I do not propose in this paper to tell an *entirely* new one. But I do hope to draw attention to the practices by which the Ministry’s planners made their linguistic decisions, and the ideas about language and propaganda that informed those decisions. Those practices, and those ideas, are seldom discussed in any detail, and they suggest an organisation that was perhaps more pioneering – for better or worse – than the Ministry is generally given credit for in the historical literature.

#### **4. The Ministry’s linguistic decision-making**

The Ministry's officials dedicated a great deal of discussion to linguistic matters. There was an order of discourse that was intensely reflexive. Officials discussed linguistic choices at length, commented on the ideas of others, and commissioned research on the effectiveness of their linguistic strategies. Some of this discussion was focused on very specific linguistic phenomena, words like *freedom* and *crusade*, and personal pronouns, especially *you*. Any researcher who set out to investigate the Ministry's discourse would be encountering language that has already been extensively pored over by its producers.

The most thoroughly discussed set of linguistic choices recorded in the Ministry's archives have to do with the wording of a series of posters to be displayed at the beginning of the war. The posters' slogans were discussed between May and September 1939, with at least eight Ministry staff putting forward suggestions. The posters came to be known as the Red Posters and their eventual slogans were as follows:

KEEP CALM AND CARRY ON

FREEDOM IS IN PERIL – DEFEND IT WITH ALL YOUR MIGHT

YOUR COURAGE, YOUR CHEERFULNESS, YOUR RESOLUTION WILL  
BRING US VICTORY

They were printed in white capital letters against a red background. This choice of colour scheme was, it seems, at least partly inspired by Hitler's *Mein Kampf* (Balfour 1939)<sup>vi</sup>, a point which is indicative of a general sense among the British propagandists that they could learn from the Nazi strategy, even if it would be unwise to let anyone know that they were doing so (see also Butler 1939b, Balfour 1979: 54, McLaine 1979: 13)<sup>vii</sup>. KEEP CALM was never officially distributed. The other two posters were, going out in their hundreds of thousands in the autumn of 1939 to factories, shops, schools, Boy Scout troops and other institutions seen to be useful in reaching a mass audience (MoI 1940).

However, the Red Posters were not regarded as successful. They were heavily criticised in a report written for the Ministry by the British social research organisation Mass-Observation. Mass-Observation told the Ministry that the posters' vocabulary was too abstract ('freedom', 'courage', 'resolution'), and that the YOUR COURAGE poster's use of pronouns suggested

a divide between the rulers ('us') and the ruled ('you'). These posters, Mass-Observation suggested, demonstrated that the Ministry was out of touch and unable to use the 'language of leadership' necessary to communicate effectively with a 'mass' audience (M-O 1939).<sup>viii</sup>

The very use of this social research organisation (and others were used too, though they focused less intensely on linguistic matters) is indicative of the emphasis that the Ministry placed on obtaining feedback on its linguistic strategies. This was a relatively new development in the order of British government discourse. Though some government departments in the 1930s produced fairly sophisticated propaganda, and a Ministry of Information had been active for a short period during World War I, its World War II manifestation was the first fully-fledged British government propaganda office (Grant 1994). The majority of the Ministry's staff were civil servants<sup>ix</sup>, rather than, say, advertisers or writers. But to provide additional expertise, the Ministry used outside agencies. Mass-Observation, which produced hundreds of reports for the Ministry, was significant in this respect. The Red Posters report mentioned above was the first that Mass-Observation produced for the Ministry, and helped to secure future work. Richard Crossman<sup>x</sup>, who digested the report for the Ministry, wrote that it was 'of very considerable value. In future if our publicity is to be effective, some form of pre-testing and post-testing will be necessary' (Crossman 1939). Mass-Observation undertook such 'pre-testing and post-testing' in order to help the Ministry's civil servants fine-tune their language. For instance, a report from August 1940 provided the Ministry with information on 'what people think the word "crusade" means and how it makes them feel' in order to inform a potential campaign using the word (1940b). Mass-Observation gathered definitions of the word from customers in an East End cafe ('A mission', 'a strong fight', 'a cause worth fighting for') and they investigated the word's associations among other members of the public ('Reminds me of the Bible', 'always sounds progressive', 'out of date'), concluding that 'On the whole, people were rather vague about the word and felt it was somewhat obscure'. Another Mass-Observation report – which ran to 25 pages – was dedicated to the pronoun *you* and its personalising potential in government propaganda (1940c). The report argued that *you* was a useful resource for bridging the 'gulf' between government and citizens, but that, unless it was used as part of a thoroughly personalised communication strategy, it risked further alienating the public: 'crude use of YOU may make people feel more conscious of this gulf', as apparently happened with the YOUR COURAGE poster discussed above. The Ministry's civil servants seem to have hoped that the poster's *us* would be read as inclusive of those addressed by the

*you* (see Waterfield 1939, discussed below). But Mass-Observation reported an exclusive interpretation, by which *us* and *you* were heard to refer to two quite distinct groups, with the former cajoling the latter from a position of relative power. Mass-Observation told the Ministry that their poster was like a sign in a pub reading ‘Your purchase of beer will bring us profits’ (1939: 98).

Even without the use of Mass-Observation, the Ministry’s linguistic ideas were subject to significant internal feedback. One draft of a leaflet entitled ‘The Struggle Ahead’ came with a covering note from its author stating that, though he had struggled to collate the necessary information, the presentation of that information ‘in text and even in visual form is a fairly straightforward business’ (Nicholson 1939a)<sup>xi</sup>. This author had clearly not appreciated the degree of linguistic work that others in the Ministry expected. He received feedback concentrated overwhelmingly on the draft’s perceived failures of presentation. It was ‘too “essay” like and not “snappy” enough’. It needed ‘gingering up’. ‘Attractive make-up and quite large clear type is essential’ since ‘It will be much in demand from elderly people and working classes’ (Francis 1939). The National Archives hold four annotated drafts of this leaflet. The ‘gingering up’ of the first draft involved: the shortening of sentences and paragraphs; increased use of headings and of typographical devices for emphasis (‘For every person living in Axis territory there are NINE outside’); shifts from passive to active voice (‘The peoples dominated from Berlin number some 180 millions’ became ‘The Rome-Berlin Axis dominates about 180 million people’); and an increased use of rhetorical questions to structure the discourse (‘What are the forces ranged on our side?’) (Nicholson 1939a, Fairfax 1939).<sup>xii</sup>

Officials were not always in agreement about the language they should use. Indeed, they often seemed to operate with a degree of linguistic uncertainty. ‘I am troubled about this Poster Question,’ wrote A.P. Waterfield in a memo to Ivison Macadam<sup>xiii</sup>:

We must get the right ideas across, and so far I can’t feel that we have got it at all. The “Keep Steady”, “Keep Calm”, doesn’t, I feel sure, hit it off: it’s too commonplace to be inspiring, and it may even annoy people that we should seem to doubt the steadiness of their nerves.

Waterfield 1939

Waterfield went on to propose one of the final slogans: ‘the reminder that it is the will of the whole nation that is going to win or lose the war. “Your courage, your cheerfulness, your resolution will bring us victory”.’ Ironically, given Waterfield’s objection to the capacity for the KEEP CALM poster to ‘annoy’ people, this YOUR COURAGE poster would be the most infamously annoying poster of the war, as we have seen above.

This metalinguistic uncertainty is a reminder of the significance of what Green (2009) calls ‘ocular power’<sup>xiv</sup>. The civil servants constituted an elite group, wielding symbolic power (Green terms it ‘vocal power’). But they were aware that their materials would be seen by an audience, and that that audience would cast judgement. Issue a ‘commonplace’ imperative to keep calm and this audience might be annoyed by the implication that they might *not* keep calm. Fail to use pronouns effectively and they might be alienated by the implied gulf between leaders and led. Fail to be ‘snappy’ enough and a leaflet might go unread or be misunderstood. The Ministry’s intense metalinguistic reflexivity was one way in which they dealt with this uncertain position. It was an early form of what Fairclough (1996) would later call the ‘technologisation’ of discourse, the strategic and relatively explicit design of language (and research about language) by large institutions. While some historians have seen the Ministry as a bastion of amateurishness (McLaine 1979), this is to underestimate the extent to which its linguistic reflexivity prefigured the intense attention paid to language and communications by government institutions later in the century (McNair 2016). In this respect, the Ministry’s linguistic work can be seen as one of the many war time technologies which would go on to have peace time significance in the years following the war (Calder 1969, Moran 2008). For political discourse analysis more generally, such metalinguistic work serves as a reminder that we are not the first to think hard about the political discourse that we investigate.

## **6. The Ministry’s conceptions of language**

The Ministry’s metalinguistic practices were not a straightforward exercise in deciding what *worked*, in any purely objective sense. Civil servants’ decisions were fundamentally influenced by their subjective conceptions of the particular linguistic resources available to them, and what those resources might be good for. In the terms of linguistic anthropology, they were guided by ‘language ideologies’; ‘basic assumptions about what signs are and how they function in the world’ (Keane 2003: 419), as well as variably strong normative conceptions of what constitutes *good* and *bad* communication, how language *should* and

*should not* be used (Woolard and Schieffelin 1994). This pertains to the second broad question posed towards the beginning of this paper; what conceptions of language and its political uses enter into the linguistic decisions that political actors make?

The language ideologies that the Ministry's civil servants brought to their work are clearest in the tension between those who argued that the Ministry's language should be dignified and formal, and those who argued for a more informal approach. The formal approach was well-established. It was the dominant view at the time that government communication should aim for 'Prestige, rather than aggressively popular, publicity' (Grant 1994: 249). But the propagandists were concerned about their ability to communicate effectively with the 'mass' of their fellow citizens. In this context, a conception of political persuasion as an exercise in informality seems to have held significant appeal for a number of the propagandists, even if it was not fully apparent in the initial Red Posters themselves. For instance, in the discussions about those posters, Max Nicholson 'advocated that the proposed initial poster of a dignified design should from the outset be supplemented by a poster which would make a more colloquial appeal' (MOI 1939). What was needed, he told a meeting of the Home Propaganda committee, was a poster which would 'promote an attitude of cheerful courage in keeping with the English character' a 'much more colloquial approach' than the abstract 'freedom'-centred slogans. Nicholson's suggestions included:

Keep that grin on your face – it makes Hitler frightened  
Say it with guns – to Hitler  
Let Hitler do the worrying  
Let's grouse – when we've won the war  
Don't worry – you're not in Germany  
Nicholson 1939b

This view was put forward by others like the future Labour MP Richard Crossman, and it was very much encouraged by Mass-Observation (Spencer-Bennett, forthcoming). Mass-Observation argued in 1940 that the Ministry, and the government more generally, should adopt a 'language of leadership'; they must 'work, sing, look, smell and speak a language of leadership which can either be understood or reacted to emotionally by the masses' (1940a: 9). A memo in July 1939 communicated some of the propaganda ideas of an unnamed source outside the Ministry. The memo's author, Rohan Butler, wrote, 'In general, affable

informality in the eminent is clearly a quality which has considerable propaganda value' (Butler 1939c). Outside the civil service – though not very far outside – George Orwell was developing a similar argument. He suggested that the government should communicate with the public using 'demotic' speech, condemning the Ministry's much-maligned FREEDOM IS IN PERIL as a 'futile' slogan, 'incapable of stirring strong feelings or being circulated by word of mouth' and favourably mentioning Mass-Observation's criticisms of abstract vocabulary (2010 [1944]: 44).

Further evidence of this concern with informality can be found in a report on First World War propaganda produced by Rohan Butler in June 1939. The report includes a survey of British propaganda posters from the earlier war, along with Butler's own comments on their potential for use in 1939. Those comments, which Butler places in parentheses, are illuminating:

Listen

Letterpress poster. A poem by H.C.Henry addressed to the Young Men of Britain. (151/2 x 13 ½ ins.).

(A type of appeal which has probably dated more than most.)

The Germans said you were not in earnest.

"We knew you'd come and give them the lie."

Depicting a crowd of civilians watching a football match, and, in another picture, soldiers in the trenches. (40 x 30 ins.)

(An interesting line of approach, but in any future publicity of a similar nature the implied distinction between You and We in the first and second sentences should be carefully avoided.)

Every child can help

"Boy. How can we help our Country?

Girl. Daddy and I are buying War Savings Stamps. WHY NOT YOU?"

(30 x 20 ins.) (If any like appeal were to be made typical Christian names should probably be substituted for Boy and Girl.)

Butler 1939a



Poetry is, apparently, ‘dated’, although Butler does not make this comment about a poster using the relatively vernacular words of the Scottish poet Robert Burns: ‘O, why the deuce should I repine/ And be an ill foreboder/ I’m 23 and five feet nine;/ I’ll go and be a sodger’. Personalised appeals, on the other hand, have not dated and should indeed now be more personal: ‘Boy’ and ‘Girl’ should be given ‘typical Christian names’ if a similar poster were to be used in 1939. Interestingly, in his comments on the ‘The Germans said you were not in earnest’ poster, Butler warns against precisely the difficulty with pronouns that the Ministry was soon to get into with its YOUR COURAGE poster.

Informality was encouraged in relation to very mass propaganda such as the Ministry’s posters. However, some of the Ministry’s propaganda was conceived to be more selectively distributed. Indeed, one of the principles of persuasion considered by the Ministry’s planners was that it should be clearly stratified. Butler suggested that ‘In a stratified society’ propaganda might work to ‘persuade the dominant group’ and that ‘To convince the educated minority, propaganda must be subtle and indirect’. When it came to ‘the masses of people’, appeal should be made ‘to their instincts and not to their reason’ (1939b). It seems though that a personalised approach was seen as useful in relation to ‘the educated minority’ as well as ‘the masses’. For instance, the Ministry planned a series of newsletters to be sent to ‘privileged recipients ... (mayors, town councillors, local officials, bank managers, clergymen, doctors, etc.)’ (Palmer 1939)<sup>xv</sup>. The linguistic style of these proposed newsletters was planned by a sub-committee which met in July 1939:

The style should be that of a private correspondent. It should be familiar and outwardly confidential in approach. ... The points to be emphasised would be conveyed in the form of gossip, interspersed with anecdotes... In presenting them as much use as possible would be made of the calculated indiscretion.

Palmer 1939

Below is the first paragraph of a draft of the newsletter, written by Harry Hodson<sup>xvi</sup>. The ‘familiar’ style is clear in such things as: the rhetorical tag question ‘doesn’t it?’; the informal fixed expressions (‘means business’, ‘make what you like’, ‘shuffled off’, ‘teeth on edge’); the parenthetical aside about the health of the German Foreign Minister Von Ribbentrop (marked with brackets and ‘by the way’); and the repeated use of ‘his friends’ to refer metonymically to the German government.

The event of the week has been the Prime Minister's statement on Danzig in the House of Commons on Monday. It seems almost unbelievable, doesn't it? that after Lord Halifax's Chatham House speech on British foreign policy even Herr von Ribbentrop and his friends could have doubted that Great Britain means business in her pledge to the Poles. But so it was. (Von Ribbentrop, by the way, is reported to have been in ill-health and to be taking a holiday, a fact of which you may make what you like, remembering, first, that exactly the same phrase was used about Vom Blomberg when he was shuffled off from the command of the German army, and secondly that only a few weeks ago Hitler was describing Von Ribbentrop as the greatest German statesman since Bismarck, although his statesmanship did not run to being ambassador in London without setting even his friends' teeth on edge with his gaffes.)

Hodson 1939

The committee's minutes went on to suggest a short statement to be included on the letter itself to mark the text 'not [as] an official bulletin, but a personal letter'. They also discussed whether the newsletter should be written under the editor's own name or whether it would be wise to 'adopt a pen-name'. They proposed ultimately that a pen-name should be used, since 'The Letter cannot be entirely the work of one man. It would best be planned at a weekly round table conference of two or three persons' (Palmer 1939). Those people might change over time, so a pen-name provides a point of apparent personal continuity, to cover for what is essentially an impersonal production. The artificial pen name was chosen so as to appear *more* personal than the actual personal names of the letter's producers.

Though the Ministry's early posters were criticised for their formality, those posters do not seem to reflect the conception emerging among at least some of the Ministry's officials that propaganda was an exercise in something like 'synthetic personalisation' (Fairclough 2015). The need to communicate with a large and unknown public was a driving force behind this personalisation, but so was a particular conception of how language could be used to achieve that task. Such personalisation was not a mere reflex of the political situation in which the Ministry was producing its discourse, it was a strategy conceived by some (and argued against by others, MOI 1939). A look at the backstage activities of the Ministry, and of their

advisors in Mass-Observation, sheds some light on the language ideologies which lay behind their public output, and highlights this concern with informal appeal.

## 7. Conclusion

I hope to have shown that archival documents are a useful source for shedding light on the decision-making practices and conceptions of language that lie behind political discourse, of which the case of the Ministry of Information provides a key example. Such documents allow us to obtain at least a glimpse of how political discourse looks from ‘backstage’, what problems it presents to political actors, and what solutions they propose. It shows how political actors work with language, and the various forms of metalinguistic practice that such work entails (see Thurlow 2020). As I have suggested above, if we are concerned with the contextual significance of political language, then evidence of what political actors have to say about their language must surely be central to understanding that context. Indeed, in relation to the Ministry of Information, at least, it would be a mistake to investigate its discourse as if that discourse has not already been thoroughly ‘analysed’ by its producers, and the archival documents allow this to be seen.

But, arguably, such benefits come with a cost. Archival research involves working with the past. The documents discussed above are eighty years old at the time of writing, and British government materials are currently only available after between twenty and thirty years. So, though this archival approach extends the scope of political discourse analysis in fruitful ways, some might object that it does so at the cost of a critical grasp on the discourse of the *present*<sup>xvii</sup>. However, a historical focus might also be desirable in itself, as a significant part of the range of things that we do in political discourse analysis. In countless political contexts, myths of the language of the past inform, and provide ammunition for, projects in the present and for the future (Heller and McIlhenny 2017). In relation to the language of World War II in particular, Hatherley (2016) has argued that the resurgence of interest in Ministry of Information posters – KEEP CALM AND CARRY ON especially – represented a form of discursive support for economic ‘austerity’ in twenty-first century Britain. To know that World War II posters were not much liked by the public at the time – and maybe not even that much-liked by the civil servants who designed them – allows us to understand their present or more recent uses in a new light (see also Toye 2013 on Churchill’s wartime speeches).

A historical approach can also help to reveal aspects of the language of the past which may be assumed to be phenomena of the present. For instance, the Ministry of Information archives are revealing in terms of Fairclough's 'synthetic personalisation' (2015). They show that it was at the forefront of at least some propagandists' conceptions of linguistic strategy half a century before the late twentieth century period during which it was given name by discourse analysts (Fairclough 1989), and that it was so even when it was not evident in those propagandists' public output. Further, in such historical documents, we can see ways of working with political discourse – ways of conceiving of effective strategies and making decisions about its production – which may go on to have significance for political communications today. The Ministry became the Central Office of Information in 1946, a much more specialised and professionalised communications department (Clark 1970) which produced the public information campaigns that took Britain through the cold war. The Central Office of Information existed until 2011, when it was replaced with the Behavioural Insights Team (Lewis 2017; now a private enterprise), and then the Government Communication Service (GCS n.d.). The latter is the producer of the 'Get ready for Brexit' campaign which is visible on British billboards, bus shelters and webpages as I write. Strikingly, in an echo of the concerns of the World War II Ministry with the mass appeal of its language, one of the final publications of the Central Office of Information before it closed was a podcast on the use of 'local accents' in government publications. The podcast's webpage summarised its message: 'Local accents seem to be more effective at conveying credible real-life experiences, so may be more appropriate for behaviour change campaigns [than RP]' (COI 2009). In the history of British political discourse, the Ministry of Information seems to stand at the front of a whole way of doing political discourse, one which is intensely reflexive, technologised, and which displays a particular concern with the persuasive potential of informal and personalised uses of language.

### **Archival sources**

Below I have listed documents taken from historical archives. For Ministry of Information documents, the 'HP' followed by Roman numerals is taken from the filing system used by the Ministry at the time, as displayed on (most of) the documents themselves. HP stands for Home Publicity. II is 'Visual statistics' (leaflets), III is 'Outdoor publicity' (posters), and V 'Co-ordination' (largely planning committee minutes). The Arabic numbers that follows were simply given to that division's documents chronologically. So, 'HP(III)35' is the 35<sup>th</sup>

document filed by the Outdoor Publicity Division of Home Publicity. The 'INF1' string at the end refers to the reference within the National Archives catalogue for that series of documents. Mass-Observation documents are listed below with a report number at the end. These numbers were given by Mass-Observation to their reports in (roughly) chronological order. The reference to Harrison's note includes the Mass-Observation box number in which this note can be found.

- Balfour, M (1939) HP(III)35 Suggestion for "Re-assurance" Poster, 9<sup>th</sup> May 1939, INF1/723
- Butler, RD'O (1939a) HP(V)53 Official British Publicity Material Published during the Great War 1914-1918, 1<sup>st</sup> June 1939, INF1/724.
- Butler RD'O (1939b) HP(V)65 Propaganda Notions (Various Sources), 21<sup>st</sup> June 1939, INF1/724
- Butler, RD'O (1939c) HP(V)70 External suggestions for Publicity Organisation, 3<sup>rd</sup> July 1939, INF1/724
- Crossman, RHS (1939) Memorandum on the report of Mass Observation upon the Red posters, 26<sup>th</sup> October 1939 INF1/261
- Fairfax, K (1939) HP(II)76 The Struggle Ahead, Summer 1939, INF1/721
- Francis, HR (1939) HP(II)45 Notes on First Draft of Pamphlet "The Struggle Ahead", 22<sup>nd</sup> May 1939, INF1/721
- Harrison, T (1939) Note on conversation with Richard Crossman, 30<sup>th</sup> August. Mass Observation Archive, 43 2/E.
- Hodson, H (1939) Specimen "copy" for news-letter, 19<sup>th</sup> July 1939, INF1/724
- Mass-Observation (1939) Government Posters in War-time, 18<sup>th</sup> October, 2.
- Mass-Observation (1940a) A New Attitude to the Problem of Civilian Morale, 12<sup>th</sup> June, 193.
- Mass-Observation (1940b) The Word "Crusade", 20<sup>th</sup> August, 363.
- Mass-Observation (1940c) Personification Processes (YOU), 10<sup>th</sup> October, 448
- Ministry of Information (1939) HP(V)41, International Propaganda and Broadcasting Enquiry Draft Minutes of the Sixth Meeting, 16<sup>th</sup> May 1939, INF1/720
- Ministry of Information (1940) Poster Campaign, 11<sup>th</sup> January 1940, INF 1/226
- Nicholson, EM (1939a) HP(II)33, The Struggle Ahead, First draft, 11<sup>th</sup> May 1939 INF1/721
- Nicholson, EM (1939b) HP(III)39, Slogans, 12<sup>th</sup> May 1939, INF1/723

Palmer, J (1939) HP(II)113, Report of the Sub-Committee appointed to Consider the Production and Distribution of an English News Letter. (Revised) 31<sup>st</sup> July 1939, INF1/722

Waterfield, AP (1939) Letter to Macadam, 17<sup>th</sup> July 1939, INF 1/226

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<sup>i</sup> I am using the term ‘metalanguage’ in a relatively broad sense here, to refer to talk and writing about language and its uses (following e.g. Jaworski, Coupland and Galasiński 2004). Some may prefer the term ‘metadiscourse’, though that has its own more specific meanings (e.g. Hyland 2005). Given that I am working with a broad sense of ‘language’ and the ‘linguistic’ which centrally includes language use, there seems to me no need for a hard (meta-)language/discourse distinction.

<sup>ii</sup> I use ‘say and write’ advisedly here I hope. Political discourse analysts have not paid attention to political uses of sign languages, though modes of communication such as music and gesture have received some attention. In any case, the key point is that political discourse analysts have tended to take the semiotic artefacts of political actors’ communicative efforts – which could theoretically be in any mode – as their objects of analysis.

<sup>iii</sup> In the discourse-historical approach, a ‘linguistic means’ is something such as ‘giving one’s group a particular name ... using comparative adjectives, and so on’, and a ‘linguistic strategy’ a slightly more general thing such as ‘claiming victimhood for oneself’ (2003: 121, 123). Linguistic strategies are achieved via linguistic means.

<sup>iv</sup> The Ministry’s planners clearly saw what they were doing as ‘propaganda’ from the outset (Ministry of Information 1939, Butler 1939b), even if they avoided using this term publicly, and often also referred to their work as ‘publicity’.

<sup>v</sup> A subscription is required to access the online Mass-Observation archive, though M-O files can be freely accessed at the Keep, University of Sussex, Brighton, UK.

<sup>vi</sup> Michael Balfour had been at Oxford, and worked at the Royal Institute of International Affairs (Chatham House) before the War. He was employed at the Ministry of Information from 1939 to 1942, and then in the Political Warfare Executive and the Psychological Warfare Division of the Supreme Headquarters Applied Expeditionary Force until the end of the War (Balfour 1979, Miall 1995). He was later Professor of European History at the University of East Anglia. His publications include *Propaganda in War 1939-1945* (Balfour 1979). This book includes reflections on his time in the Ministry among a thorough study of British and German propaganda. While he is largely critical of the Ministry’s attempts to develop morale-boosting propaganda in the early stages of the war, he nonetheless offers a defence of the unpopular YOUR COURAGE poster: ‘if the adjective [sic] had been “our” rather than “your”, a loophole would have been provided for the individual to opt out of responsibility on the ground that other people could be relied on to cope’. He goes on to add: ‘In the

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psychological climate which had developed, *any* wording used by the Government would have been criticised' (1979: 57).

<sup>vii</sup> Rohan Butler (1917-1996) was an Oxford historian who was assigned to the Ministry of Information in 1939, sitting on the Home Publicity Committee from the Spring of 1939. In 1941, as a Fellow of All Souls College, Oxford, he wrote *The Roots of National Socialism 1783-1933* (Butler 1941).

<sup>viii</sup> Mass-Observation's report on the Red Posters was later reworked into sections of one of the books published by the organisation for a wider audience, *War Begins at Home* (1940).

<sup>ix</sup> They had not all been civil servants for long, though. The beginning of WWII was a time when many were drafted into the civil service from elsewhere, the universities especially, as is clear from the biographical notes that I have included here. It was 'staffed for the most part not by regular civil-servants ... but by brilliant amateurs from the Universities and the intellectual world of London' (Nicolson 1970: 94).

<sup>x</sup> Richard 'Dick' Crossman (1907-1974) worked briefly at the Ministry from 1939 to 1940, having lectured and published at New College, Oxford, earlier in the 1930s and published a number of books, such as *Plato To-Day* (1937). In 1937, having left Oxford, he had attempted to win a seat as the Labour MP for West Birmingham (Howard 2011), and his appointment at the Ministry is described by McLaine as a 'token gesture' to the Labour movement (1979: 6). Following his time at the Ministry, he worked, like Balfour above, at the Political Warfare Executive. After the war, he was elected Labour MP for Coventry East (1945-1974), taking a number of prominent roles in Harold Wilson's government in the 1960s. He is well-known for the diaries that he kept during his time as an MP and Minister (Crossman 1991). In the period that this paper considers, he was a good friend of Tom Harrison, the wartime director of Mass-Observation. With the Ministry's Head of Home Intelligence Mary Adams, Crossman seems to have played a significant role in establishing M-O's regular contract with the Ministry. Unfortunately, Crossman's published diaries do not go back to his time at the Ministry of Information. But Harrison's notes on the pair's conversations suggest a disdain for the Ministry's staff of 'dons' who 'lived retired from the world' and had little sense of how to appeal to a mass audience (Harrison 1939, Spencer-Bennett, in press).

<sup>xi</sup> Max Nicholson (1904-2003) worked at the Ministry of Information for only six weeks, but remaining in the civil service until 1951 (Greenwood 2009). In 1931, Nicholson had co-founded Political and Economic Planning, a think-tank which promoted the use of scientific and technical expertise in public affairs (Calder 1967: 470), and which had provided feedback on government publicity campaigns during the 1930s (Grant 1994: 191-192). After leaving the civil service, Nicholson published a number of books on politics and on the environment, including *The System*, a critique of 'the misgovernment of modern Britain' (Nicholson 1967).

<sup>xii</sup> K. Fairfax and J. Palmer were journalists who worked in the Ministry's Planning Division (Grant 1994: 243). I have been unable to find any biographical information on Francis, whose draft of *The Struggle Ahead* is mentioned above.

<sup>xiii</sup> A P Waterfield (1888-1965) chaired the Interdepartmental Committee on Publicity Expenditure, established in by the Treasury 1938 to weigh up the costs of publicity across government departments (Grant 1994: 228). McLaine characterises him as 'a career civil servant with no credentials in the field of publicity' (1979: 31). He worked at the Ministry between 1939 and 1940, and in various Whitehall roles between 1911 and 1958 (Chapman 2008).

Iverson Macadam (1894-1974) was, before the war, Secretary of Chatham House. In the Spring and Summer of 1939, he chaired the International Propaganda and Broadcasting Enquiry (which became Home Publicity), and worked for the Ministry until March 1941, at which point he returned to Chatham House.

<sup>xiv</sup> In borrowing Green's concept here, I am aware that it is primarily intended to help us theorise the nature of democracy, rather than political communication more generally. The Ministry's activities were not particularly democratic. Nonetheless, the concept of ocular power nicely captures the civil servants' sense that their linguistic efforts were subject to judgement by members of the public.

<sup>xv</sup> It is not clear whether these newsletters were ever actually distributed.

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<sup>xvi</sup> Henry ‘Harry’ Hodson was, like many other of the Ministry’s civil servants, at Oxford earlier in the 1930s. He served as Director of the Ministry’s Empire Division from 1939 to 1941 (McLaine 1979: 223). After the War he was editor of the Sunday Times (1950-61) and author of a number of books, including *The Great Divide: Britain—India—Pakistan* (Hodson 1985).

<sup>xvii</sup> Or, more specifically, it is the very recent past that has been political discourse analysts’ main concern, since political discourse is generally analysed after the event.