

# CHAPTER ONE

## INTRODUCTION

### 1.1 Background of the Study

Language is very important in human life. It is a communication system in which we can convey our thoughts, opinions and feelings to other people. According to a Swiss linguist, Ferdinand de Saussure, language is a system of signs which expresses ideas. Then, in his book entitled *Course in General Linguistics*, he states the concept of Semiotics.

The simplest definition of Semiotics according to Saussure is the study of signs. Saussure refers to language as the most important of all systems of signs (Saussure 15). Aside from Saussure, another linguist, named Roman Jakobson, adds that “language is the central and most important among all human semiotic systems” (Jakobson 455). However, in a semiotic study, signs are not limited to written texts only, but apply to everything which signifies or stands for something else. Therefore, signs can also be visual signs.

There are various visual signs around us, for example, posters, novels, advertisements, pamphlets, magazines and photographs. By using pictures with special meanings, we can more easily express our thoughts. Moreover, it is interesting to see how a combination of visual image and text can accentuate and enhance the message.

This thesis is concerned with one of the visual signs, namely, propaganda posters. According to *Harper Collins Dictionary*, *propaganda* is “the organized dissemination of information, allegations, etc. to assist or damage the cause of a government or movement” (“Propaganda,” def. 1). The purpose of propaganda is to change opinions and influence decisions. Simply put, it has the purpose of persuasion.

The data source I use are two American propaganda posters during World War II, specifically the posters that were addressed to women. In my opinion, it is important for us to discuss the meaning behind these propaganda posters through a semiotic analysis.

The Second World War was the worst war that ever happened in the world. It is estimated that more than 55 million people died during this war, which lasted from 1939 until 1945 (“World War II”). As a matter of fact, drawing on the experience of World War I, most Americans hoped to stay out of that war. However, the US government realized that war was getting closer, and thus they tried to convince the citizens by creating pro-war propaganda.

Propaganda is generally carried out through media which is capable of reaching out to a large number of people. At that time, it was acknowledged that propaganda posters were much less risky and less difficult than oral

communication (“What is Propaganda”). The objectives of the government for the propaganda were recruitment, financing the war effort, unifying the public behind the war effort and factory production of war materials (“Winning Over Hearts and Minds”).

Those ‘first-wave’ propaganda posters worked successfully, with the result that most of the American men went to the battlefield. After that, women’s lives greatly changed. The government realized women had to fill some jobs that were historically for males to free men to go to battle. Propaganda posters targeted towards women urged them to do these things and promoted the idea that women could contribute to the war effort (“Victory Begins at Home”). And they did. An officer of the the German Army stated that American women were one of the greatest weapons America had and if the Germans had realized it sooner, there might have been a different outcome of the war. The war was won by the Allies, and America realized they could not win without the aid of the women (“American Women in World War II”).

I choose two propaganda posters addressed to women as my data source because during World War II, U.S.A. produced some of the most successful propaganda posters in history. As a woman, I am also very interested in posters that specifically focus on women. Moreover, there is a saying “a picture is worth a thousand words.” Propaganda posters are loaded with meanings and I think it is interesting to know how a picture can influence Americans’ mindset and attitude.

I choose Saussurean Semiotics in analyzing the data because it is the basis for any study of semiotics. In addition, Saussure’s theory is the one which was

taught in class and recommended by lecturers, so that it is a theory which I feel most familiar with.

The significance of this topic is people can realize that a poster is not just a piece of art. It contains meaningful messages. Hopefully, my thesis will also give some useful information for the readers so that they can understand how to make an effective and persuasive poster.

*(749 words)*

## **1.2 Statement of the Problem**

In this thesis I would like to analyze the following problems:

1. What are the signifiers and the signifieds of the two propaganda posters addressed to American women during World War II?
2. What is the signification of the posters?

## **1.3 Purpose of the Study**

This research is conducted:

1. to find the signifiers and the signifieds of the two propaganda posters addressed to American women during World War II
2. to analyze the signification of the posters.

## **1.4 Methods of Research**

In writing this thesis, first I chose a significant topic I wanted to analyze and then read some reference books related to it. Afterwards, I chose a theory I

would use and chose two propaganda posters as my data source. Following that, I analyzed the data and finally wrote the research report.

### **1.5 Organization of the Thesis**

This thesis is divided into four chapters. Chapter One is Introduction, which consists of Background of the Study, Statement of the Problem, Purpose of the Study, Methods of Research, and Organization of the Thesis. Chapter Two is the presentation of the theory which was put forward by Ferdinand de Saussure. Chapter Three contains the analysis of the data. Finally, Chapter Four is Conclusion, which is followed by Bibliography and Appendix.