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ORWELL ON LANGUAGE AND POLITICS

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Abstract

Newspeak, the engineered language of George Orwell's novel Nineteen Eighty-Four, is discussed in the context of Orwell's wider views on language and politics and the need for linguistic intervention as part of the struggle against tyranny, and of the related or opposed ideas of some of Orwell's contemporaries (Chase, Ogden & Richards) and Saussure.

Newspeak was the official language of Oceania and had been devised to meet the ideological needs of Ingsoc, or English Socialism... The purpose of Newspeak was not only to provide a medium of expression for the world-view and mental habits proper to the devotees of Ingsoc, but to make all other modes of thought impossible... This was done partly by the invention of new words, but chiefly by eliminating undesirable words and by stripping such words as remained of unorthodox meanings, and so far as possible of all secondary meanings whatever. To give a single example. The word *free* still existed in Newspeak, but it could only be used in such statements as 'This dog is free from lice' or 'This field is free from weeds'. It could not be used in its old sense of 'politically free' or 'intellectually free', since political and intellectual freedom no longer existed even as concepts, and were therefore of necessity nameless... Newspeak was designed 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. (George Orwell, "Appendix: The Principles of Newspeak", from *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, 312-13.)

It would be futile to point to this or that event in the life of Eric Blair/George Orwell (1903-1950) as having uniquely shaped his views on language and politics. Certainly, though, a decisive influence was the Spanish civil war, in which he fought on the Republican side in 1936-7 and was shot in the throat. Before the war was over he and his fellow socialists found themselves in less danger from the Fascists they had gone to fight than from their communist 'allies', who accused them of being a Trotskyite Fifth Column secretly in league with the enemy, and ended up slaughtering many of them. Orwell, his wife and a few companions narrowly escaped to France just as the communists were preparing to arrest them.

So controversial were Orwell's critical assessments of socialist policies in *The Road to Wigan Pier* (1937) that his leftist publisher Victor Gollancz, who had commissioned him to write the book, added a Preface apologising to readers and disowning Orwell's arguments. When, a year later, Orwell completed *Homage to Catalonia* (1938), recounting the full story of his Spanish war experiences, he had to find another publisher. By now he was definitively on the road to *Animal Farm* (1945) and *Nineteen Eighty-Four* (1949), the two books that secured him a unique and enduring status as one of the most powerful voices in world literature of his or any other century. Even though he never ceased to identify himself as a leftist, the direct target of these devastating satirical portraits of totalitarian regimes was the Stalinist government of the USSR. This was at a time when too many Western socialists were still tending to act as apologists for Stalin in spite of abundant evidence of his ruthless tyranny, which Orwell had had a taste of in Spain.

Leftist faith in the USSR required an idealism alien to Orwell, who had the critical eye of a realist and the deep sensibilities of a traditional, Millsian liberal. Whatever system would allow people the greatest freedom to do and think as they pleased would have his support. While he continued to hope that disparities of wealth between the rich and poor might be limited, he was not willing to let tyranny be the price. Stalin's government, which was progressively lowering people's standard of living while

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claiming to do the opposite, was not truly 'socialist' at all, and even more dangerous than its economics were its attempts to distort and control the truth. In this it had a ready-made weapon at its disposal: language.

Orwell was not alone in the fear that language could be manipulated so as to control people's thoughts, while leaving them under the illusion that they were giving voice to their individual wills. Anxiety about propaganda was widespread in the years surrounding the two world wars. Perhaps, however, no one else saw so clearly how easy such mind control would be for *any* state to carry out and justify to itself. The potential lay within the principle of government itself, indeed within society itself, since even in an anarchic state one group would inevitably try to gain control over the others. Still, recent history had shown Orwell that the more radically a state aimed to perfect society, the more individual freedom of thought and action would necessarily be suppressed in the process.

In 1946, just after the phenomenal success of *Animal Farm*, Orwell's article "Politics and the English Language" appeared in the prominent London literary review *Horizon*. Described as "his most influential essay" by his biographer Michael Sheldon (1991: 430), it is interesting for the insight it offers into his process as a writer and stylist as well as in how it anticipates the core problem of language he would address so memorably in *Nineteen Eighty-Four*. Given that his satirical *Newspeak* is an engineered language, it may be surprising that the 1946 article opens with an earnest call for conscious action to engineer current English.

Most people who bother with the matter at all would admit that the English language is in a bad way, but it is generally assumed that we cannot by conscious action do anything about it... Underneath this lies the half-conscious belief that language is a natural growth and not an instrument which we shape for our own purposes.

...The point is that the process is reversible. Modern English, especially written English, is full of bad habits which spread by imitation and which can be avoided if one is willing to take the necessary trouble. If one gets rid of these habits one can think more clearly, and to think clearly is a necessary first step towards political regeneration... ("Politics", 252-3)

The linguistic 'bad habits' Orwell refers to, and the 'clear thinking' he opposes to it, have to do with what comes first in the mind of the speaker or writer, words or images. The healthy way is to start from mental pictures, then find words to describe them. For if one does the opposite, it is tempting to let the words string themselves together in well-worn patterns, which lets the words determine the meaning rather than the other way round.

... [M]odern writing at its worst does not consist in picking out words for the sake of their meaning and inventing images in order to make the meaning clearer. It consists in gumming together long strips of words which have already been set in order by someone else, and making the results presentable by sheer humbug. The attraction of this way of writing is that it is easy... ("Politics", 259)

This invasion of one's mind by ready-made phrases (...) can only be prevented if one is constantly on guard against them, and every such phrase anaesthetizes a portion of one's brain. ("Politics", 263)

On one level, Orwell's view is similar to the advice generally offered to students of musical composition. They are warned against working at the keyboard, where it is too easy to let their fingers do the composing by falling into familiar and comfortable patterns. Composing mentally is likelier to produce music that is original rather than derivative, and cerebral rather than emotional. Beyond this, however, Orwell is concerned about the fact that "if thought corrupts language, language can also corrupt thought" ("Politics", 262). If we begin from mental images, those images will be of *concrete*

things, whereas starting from words is likelier to produce purely abstract thinking. Orwell, realist that he is, is not against abstract thinking *so long as it is grounded in observable reality*.

When you think of a concrete object, you think wordlessly, and then, if you want to describe the thing you have been visualizing, you probably hunt about till you find the exact words that seem to fit it. When you think of something abstract you are more inclined to use words from the start... Probably it is better to put off using words as long as possible and get one's meaning as clear as one can through pictures or sensations. ("Politics": 264)

This discussion has links with the long-standing Western philosophical debate about realism and nominalism – whether what words mean connects to things outside language or not. But where do the 'politics' come in? The answer is that this detachment of language from observable reality is what makes it possible for a political party to maintain an orthodoxy among its followers, and to dupe those whom it wishes to enslave. If the party manages to use language in a way that prevents concrete mental pictures from being called up, people will not understand what is happening to them, and they cannot rebel against what they do not understand.

In our time it is broadly true that political writing is bad writing. Where it is not true, it will generally be found that the writer is some kind of rebel, expressing his private opinions and not a 'party line'. Orthodoxy, of whatever colour, seems to demand a lifeless, imitative style. ("Politics", 260-61)

In our time, political speech and writing are largely the defence of the indefensible... Such phraseology is needed if one wants to name things without calling up mental pictures of them. (ibid., 261-2)

The linguistic intervention Orwell calls for is not a restructuring of the language, just a change in how its elements are put to use. One should always start with thought rather than words, and with thought about what is concrete and empirically observable, and therefore verifiable. Then and only then can language hope to serve the interests of truth, rather than merely those of power.

Toward the end of the article he makes clear that his call for abstractions to be grounded is by no means to reject them entirely. On the contrary, too great a distrust of abstractions can have catastrophic political consequences of its own.

Stuart Chase and others have come near to claiming that all abstract words are meaningless, and have used this as a pretext for advocating a kind of political quietism. Since you don't know what Fascism is, how can you struggle against Fascism? ("Politics", 265)

Stuart Chase (1888-1985) was the author of *The Tyranny of Words* (1938), a widely read book that helped to popularise General Semantics, a movement concerned with how metaphysical traps encoded into language lead us into false modes of thought. The fact that Chase encouraged direct intervention into language use in order to produce clear thinking would seem to link him to Orwell's programme. But as the preceding quote suggests, Chase was *so* sceptical about abstract words as to delude himself that their 'tyranny' was more real than Hitler's. Early in his book he writes:

Abstract terms are personified to become burning, fighting realities. Yet if the knowledge of semantics were general... the conflagration could hardly start...

...Bad language is now the mightiest weapon in the arsenal of despots and demagogues. Witness Dr. Goebbels. Indeed, it is doubtful if a people learned in semantics would tolerate any sort of supreme political dictator... A typical speech by an aspiring Hitler would be translated into its intrinsic meaning, if any. Abstract words and phrases without discoverable referents would register a semantic blank, noises without meaning. For instance:

The Aryan Fatherland, which has nursed the souls of heroes, calls upon you for the supreme sacrifice which you, in whom flows heroic blood, will not fail, and which will echo forever down the corridors of history.

This would be translated:

The blab blab, which has nursed the blabs of blabs, calls upon you for the blab blab which you, in whom flows blab blood, will not fail, and which will echo blab down the blabs of blab.

The 'blab' is not an attempt to be funny; it is a semantic blank. Nothing comes through. The hearer, versed in reducing high-order abstractions to either nil or a series of roughly similar events in the real world of experience, and protected from emotive associations with such words, simply hears nothing comprehensible. The demagogue might as well have used Sanskrit. (The Tyranny of Words, 14)

The 'blab' paragraph, which is all the more hilarious for Chase's claim that it isn't meant to be funny, prefigures what Orwell will term 'duckspeak' (*Nineteen Eighty-Four*, 322). If Chase thought that "Bad language is now the mightiest weapon in the arsenal of despots and demagogues", Orwell had a neck wound to remind him that enormous military-industrial complexes such as Hitler and Stalin possessed were not so easily 'blabbed' away. Hitler's rhetoric and Goebbels' propaganda may have played a key role in the Nazi rise to power, but now that the power was theirs to lose, the way to combat it was not to proclaim their abstractions empty. On the contrary, the urgent need was to show people how the use of abstract words by despots filled them with concrete and terrible meanings.

In Orwell's *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, Newspeak is the re-engineered English of Oceania, a country comprising the Americas, the Atlantic islands including the British Isles, Australasia and the southern portion of Africa. Oceania is perpetually at war with one of the world's other two countries, Eurasia and Eastasia. It is controlled by the Party, whose head, Big Brother, is a symbol rather than an actual person. There is an Inner Party of a privileged 2% of the population; a larger Outer Party which does not enjoy anything like the same privileges; and the proles, the remaining 85% whose lives have not changed radically since before the Revolution, except that in material terms they are considerably worse off. The mind control described in the opening quotation from the novel is directed almost entirely at the members of the Outer Party, and is enforced by the Thought Police, which the Inner Party controls. The proles are considered not worth bothering about.

The idea of re-engineering the English language by reducing its vocabulary had already been prominently put into practice by C. K. Ogden (1889-1957). The chapter on Definitions in *The Meaning of Meaning* (1923), co-authored by Ogden and I. A. Richards (1893-1979), had led Ogden to formulate the idea of a 'Basic English' that would be capable of expressing anything with a vocabulary of just 850 words (see further Joseph 1999). Orwell was interested in Basic and wrote about it on a couple of occasions in the 1940s. The feature of Basic trumpeted most loudly by Ogden, the fact that it had done away with verbs, has a direct parallel in Newspeak (*Nineteen Eighty-Four*, 165). Another feature of Basic, its replacement of certain negative adjectives by their positive counterpart preceded by *un-*, is exaggerated to the point of absurdity in Newspeak, where for example the equivalent of the Oldspeak form 'terrible' is *doubleplusungood*.

Like the project for *The Meaning of Meaning* from which it sprang, Basic was an attempt to solve a perceived crisis of meaning in the modern world. In Ogden's view, the First World War was itself the result of the misuse of complex abstract words like *democracy* and *freedom* for purposes of propaganda, and any hope of future world peace depended upon the ability of thinking people to control the meanings of such words so that they could not be abused. *The Meaning of Meaning* opens with a long historical survey of attempts to do this, including the solution proposed by John Locke (1632-1704) (see Harris & Taylor 1997, Chapter 10). Locke classified ideas into the simple and the complex, and among complex ideas he believed that those he called 'mixed modes', including all

moral terms, were the likeliest to create misunderstanding – unless they were always carefully defined in terms of the simple ideas, derived from direct sensory experience, that combined to produce them. For essentially the same reason, Ogden believed that paring down the language to 850 words, a large portion of them referring to concrete substances, would make it virtually impossible to use language in such a way as to deceive people for propagandistic purposes.

But Orwell realised that it might actually have the opposite effect. Propaganda can only be combated by rational analysis and argument. This entails rephrasing propagandistic statements in a different form. If such rephrasing were made impossible through the loss of alternative words in which the same idea might be given a different linguistic shape, then it might no longer be possible to question the truth of any statement. Orwell made this into the precise aim of Newspeak: “to make all other modes of thought impossible”. For instance, according to the Party, $2 + 2 = 5$. The hero of the novel, Winston Smith, realises from the evidence of his own eyes that this is wrong, but the Party already has enough control over his thought and language that he cannot put together the argument he intuitively knows would prove its falsity. The same is true with the Party’s operation for rewriting history, in which Winston himself is engaged, and indeed with its three slogans:

WAR IS PEACE
FREEDOM IS SLAVERY
IGNORANCE IS STRENGTH

Winston’s estranged wife Katharine “had not a thought in her head that was not a slogan” (*Nineteen Eighty-Four*, 69) – that is, a collocation of words and thought pre-packaged by the Party. By reducing the number of words and their possible collocations, the Party strictly limits the occurrence of original thought, whether based on empirical observation or individual reasoning. For Winston, this stranglehold on sensory evidence and creativity in combining words represents what is most evil and oppressive about the Party.

The Party told you to reject the evidence of your eyes and ears. It was their final, most essential command. His heart sank as he thought of the enormous power arrayed against him, the ease with which any Party intellectual would overthrow him in debate, the subtle arguments which he would not be able to understand, must less answer. And yet he was in the right!... Stones are hard, water is wet, objects unsupported fall towards the earth’s centre. With the feeling that he was... setting forth an important axiom, he wrote:

Freedom is the freedom to say that two plus two make four. If that is granted, all else follows. (Nineteen Eighty-Four, 84)

It is because of the way his command of language has been controlled by the Party that he could not hope to understand or answer the arguments. At the end of the novel, Winston, his mind broken by torture, signals how completely he has submitted to the Party’s doctrine when he traces “almost unconsciously” in the dust on the table: $2 + 2 = 5$ (*Nineteen Eighty-Four*, 303).

Newspeak is directly connected to the ideas expressed by Orwell in “Politics and the English Language”. As the ultimate language for the suppression of thought, Newspeak represents the horrific end of the road Orwell describes English as travelling, the point at which it is too late to get rid of the linguistic bad habits that prevent clear thinking and political regeneration because they have become structurally ingrained. The appeal of Basic, which Orwell himself had felt, is perhaps just a further symptom of how far this development has gone. Originally proposed as a way of grounding language in observable reality, Ogden’s Basic aimed to do this by intervening directly into the structure of English, paring it down to a fraction of its traditional form. But wasn’t *this* already a form of linguistic tyranny, limiting rather than expanding people’s freedom to speak and think as they pleased? If so, Orwell the interventionist in linguistic usage could not support it any more than Orwell the socialist could stomach the excesses of Stalinism.

The point made at the end of the 1946 essay, about excessive distrust of abstractions leading to an inability to recognise or combat Fascism, is echoed in the description of the word *free* in Newspeak (see the citation at the head of this article). It has been limited to just its concrete meaning. "This dog is free from lice" certainly calls up a clearer mental image than do "politically free" or "intellectually free". But again, while abstraction without a concrete anchor remains extremely dangerous, the failure to abstract away from certain key concrete anchors is no less threatening.

In Oceania, only the proles have "stayed human" (*Nineteen Eighty-Four*, 172), and we see from the occasional glimpses of their dialogue that their language is Oldspeak, as in this conversation about the lottery which Winston overhears in a pub:

'Can't you bleeding well listen to what I say? I tell you no number ending in seven ain't won for over fourteen months!'

'Yes it 'as, then!'

'No, it 'as not! Back 'ome I got the 'ole lot of 'em for over two years wrote down on a piece of paper. I takes 'em down reg'lar as the clock. An' I tell you, no number ending in seven -'

'Yes, a seven 'as won!...' (*Nineteen Eighty-Four*, 88)

Each of the two proles is capable of independent thought, and one of them makes an argument based on historical evidence that would be beyond the ability of any Party member. For its members, the Party is rewriting history every day and making sure they cannot perceive it happening. What is more, the fact that these proles are arguing about numbers contrasts with the inability of Party members to argue about the sum of $2 + 2$. And the numerous non-standard features of their 'Oldspeak' cause it to ring with freedom to Orwell's ears. In his book *The English People* (written 1944, published 1947) he wrote:

...[P]robably the deadliest enemy of good English is what is called 'standard English'. This dreary dialect, the language of leading articles, White Papers, political speeches, and BBC news bulletins, is undoubtedly spreading: it is spreading downwards in the social scale, and outwards into the spoken language. Its characteristic is its reliance on ready-made phrases - *in due course, take the earliest opportunity, warm appreciation...* - which may once have been fresh and vivid, but have now become mere thought-saving devices, having the same relation to living English as a crutch has to a leg. Anyone preparing a broadcast or writing to *The Times* adopts this kind of language almost instinctively, and it infects the spoken tongue as well. So much has our language been weakened that the imbecile chatter in Swift's essay on polite conversation (a satire on the upper-class talk of Swift's own day) would actually be rather a good conversation by modern standards. (*The English People*, 26-7)

The continuation of this passage introduces a further political (or more accurately socio-political) dimension to Orwell's view of language and freedom. The power of language to promote clear thinking and combat tyranny, as discussed in "Politics and the English Language", is *inherent to the language of the working classes*. The tendencies of language and thought he believes must be resisted are those he associates with the educated middle and upper classes.

The temporary decadence of the English language is due, like so much else, to our anachronistic class system. 'Educated' English has grown anaemic because for long past it has not been reinvigorated from below. The people likeliest to use simple concrete language, and to think of metaphors that really call up a visual image, are those who are in contact with physical reality... And the vitality of English depends on a steady supply of images of this kind. It follows that language, at any rate the English language, suffers when the educated classes lose touch with the manual workers. (*The English People*, 27)

Part of the reason the proles of Oceania have stayed human is that they have clung to real language. With all its faults, traditional English at least offers the *hope* of free speech and thought, and will do so until these possibilities are standardised out of existence. In the novel, Winston concludes that the only hope for the future lies with the proles, and this conclusion corresponds with Orwell's view on the future of the language as expressed in *The English People*. Through Newspeak, Orwell warns the world of the danger that standardisation of language goes hand in hand with standardisation of thought. In particular, radical attempts to restructure the language, even if aimed at the improvement of thought, could result in tyranny no less than communist revolutions have done. The danger is especially great if, as with Basic, *reduction* of the language is the means by which it is to be brought under control.

The opposition Orwell establishes between the language of different social classes aligns with the difference between empiricist and conventionalist views of language. One well-known modern embodiment of this conflict is Ogden & Richards' (1923) rejection of Ferdinand de Saussure's (1857-1913) conventionalist view of the linguistic sign. Saussure (on whom see Joseph 1999b), in line with one mode of 'relativistic' continental thinking, believed that the meaning of a word is not tied to some physical object in the world around us, but is strictly conceptual and is a part of a given language just as much as is the sound pattern used to signify it. The evidence for this includes the existence of words for abstractions and things like unicorns that do not exist in the world; the vastly different ways in which languages divide up the world, for instance in terms of the colours they do or do not distinguish, and the various categories (noun genders, for example) into which they place words; metaphorical uses of words; and the occurrence of semantic shift and change.

Ogden & Richards, in the British empiricist tradition, carefully considered Saussure's view and rejected it on the grounds that it was self-negating. For if the meanings of words are completely cut off from things in the world, there is no possibility of verifying whether or not anything anyone says is true, starting with Saussure's own statement.

Unfortunately this theory of signs, by neglecting entirely the things for which signs stand, was from the beginning cut off from any contact with scientific methods of verification. De Saussure, however, does not appear to have pursued the matter far enough for this defect to become obvious. (*The Meaning of Meaning*, 8)

Orwell's position is that the English language in the mid-20th century is in a perilous state because those who speak and write it do so following the model of Saussure, treating words as though they were unconnected to reality and therefore producing meanings that are arbitrary and internal to the language rather than engaging with the world. At least, this is what educated middle and upper-class speakers of 'standard English' do. The extract cited above from *The English People* suggests that the working classes instead follow the Ogden & Richards model, in which meaning is connected to things in the world. True socialist that he was, Orwell believed that the working-class way of signifying was better, healthier, truer than the unverifiable contents of standard English.

No doubt the realist in Orwell recognised the extent to which views such as these represent vast overgeneralisations that romanticise the working class and fail to explain how a middle-class old Etonian like himself could come to understand these things more clearly than any Lancashire coal miner. But such objections would not come to the fore when he felt so strongly the need to make known the dangerous political ramifications of the arbitrariness of language.

In *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, Orwell makes manifest his view of the essential difference between standard and working-class English by pushing the tendencies of standardisation to their extreme in the form of Newspeak. Despite taking some of its inspiration from Ogden's Basic, Newspeak is completely Saussurean in that its meanings cannot be verified against anything in the real world. What Orwell wants to suggest is that the best hope for the future of humankind lies in *acting as if* language operates as Ogden & Richards say it must, tying it to observable reality in the way that working-class speakers do, and refusing to be swept up by the conventionalist Saussurean view of

language that, alas, describes all too well the dangerous workings of standard English. He believes we can do this because language is not a 'natural growth', but an institution we control. We need scepticism – just enough of it to keep us on guard against those who would take control over us, but never forgetting that one very powerful way they might do this is to encourage us to be *so* sceptical that we do not even believe we are being controlled. If we want to remain free, we must be sceptical about everything, including, paradoxically, scepticism itself. It can only be meaningful so long as we do not paint ourselves into the corner of being sceptical that two plus two equals four.

This is the corner occupied by members of the Outer Party of Oceania, as well as by "Stuart Chase and others" who cannot struggle against Fascism because their scepticism about language has blinded them to the reality of abstractions. In the same corner are those who would deny that the sum of $2 + 2$ can be pinned down to anything more precise than 'an arbitrary signified', and who find in this ultra-relativism a liberation from the 'tyranny of words' – not as Chase meant it, but in the sense of a language conceived as the embodiment of logic and truth. No one can ever know the whole of logic or truth, the argument goes; therefore they are mythical. Orwell's message is: forget about this all-or-nothing approach to truth and knowledge. Know what you can, for every bit matters. Know it as simply and directly as you can, and tell it the same way. Above all, know that the metaphorical 'tyranny' of words is all that stands in the way of the very un-metaphorical tyranny of Big Brother.

Note

A slightly modified version of this article will appear as a chapter of *Landmarks in Linguistic Thought II: The Twentieth Century*, co-authored with Nigel Love and Talbot J. Taylor, to both of whom I am grateful for comments on an earlier draft.

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The 1987 re-edition of *Nineteen Eighty-Four* (London: Secker & Warburg), cited here in the Penguin Twentieth Century Classics edition of 1989, corrects significant mistakes in earlier published versions, including the omission of the number '5' from Winston's final tracing in the dust of $2 + 2 = 5$ (*Nineteen Eighty-Four*, 303). "Politics and the English Language" appeared in *Horizon* vol. 13, no. 76, April 1946, 252-65. *The English People* (London: Collins, 1947) has been cited here from its reprinting in *The Collected Essays, Journalism and Letters of George Orwell*, ed. by Sonia Orwell and Ian Angus, vol. 3 (London: Secker & Warburg, 1968), 1-38. All of Orwell's known writings are now available in the 20-volume *Complete Works of George Orwell* (London: Secker & Warburg, 1986-98).

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