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Orwell's Language and Thought in  
"Politics and the English Language" and 1984

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When I first started this paper, I expected to find near-unanimous approval of Orwell's insight on language. After all, "Politics and the English Language" has been widely anthologized, while "double-think" and "Newspeak" have become common terms. In my composition classes, I had heard his name treated with the same respect I associate with Chomsky and other lofty figures in language thought, so by association, I regarded Orwell highly important, if not revolutionary. I expected most people would agree with my anthology:

Orwell had explored in one of his most influential essays, "Politics and the English Language," the decay of language and the ways in which it might be checked. The forty years that have passed since it was written have only confirmed the accuracy of its diagnosis and the value of its prescription (Norton 2260).

To be sure, Orwell may be one of the most capable prose writers ever, and he seems to speak sense to us. In a time when missiles are called "peace keepers" and taxes "revenue enhancements" Orwell's objections to dishonest political writing seem relevant and incisive. But regardless of Orwell's popular reputation (and I'm not sure he really sought for such a reputation), few linguists share such veneration. As Quirk claims, "the time [is] right for a reevaluation of Orwell, especially in view of the undue reverence in which he is held as a serious thinker on social and linguistic matters" (48). I'm afraid I agree with Quirk, since Orwell's ideas are generally unoriginal and lack a sound theoretical foundation.

We might begin with his status as a "revolutionary" thinker, when in fact, his thoughts on language are highly derivative. Quirk points out, the notion of language as a "Loaded Weapon," a manipulative tool, has been around for centuries. Francis Bacon had spoken of people "too ready to be moved by words themselves without thought to what weight of matter they connoted" (49). And later Goethe's Mephistopheles says:

where concepts fail,  
At the right time a word is thrust in there.  
With words we fitly can our foes assail,  
With words a system we prepare,  
Words we quite fitly can believe (Faust I.1900-04).

During the 20's and 30's, the chilling harangues of Hitler, Stalin, and others heightened fears of language manipulation and gave new impetus to the plain language movement which sought to combat such manipulation. These were the decades of the Fowlers, A.P. Herbert, Eric Partridge, and Ivor Brown. Orwell was drawn heavily to this movement, and often included its ideas in his writing. In

"Politics and the English Language," for example, Orwell clearly links decayed language with degenerate politics: "Modern English . . . is full of bad habits . . . If one gets rid of these habits one can think more clearly, and to think clearly is a necessary first step toward political regeneration" (128). And in his summary, Orwell claims "If you simplify your English, you are freed from the worst follies of orthodoxy" (139).

Quirk further claims that "Politics" is "little more than an expansion of the five maxims set forth on the first page of the King's English by the Fowler brothers in 1906" (50). A quick comparison between the two illustrates Quirk's point:

<u>ORWELL</u>	<u>FOWLER</u>
1. Never use a metaphor, simile, or other figure of speech which you are used to seeing in print.	
2. Never use a long word where a short one will do.	Prefer the short word to the long.
3. If it is possible to cut a word out, always cut it out.	Prefer the single word to the circumduction.
4. Never use the passive where you can use the active	
5. Never use a foreign phrase, a scientific word, or a jargon word if you can think of an everyday English equivalent.	Prefer the familiar word to the far-fetched. Prefer the Saxon word to the Romance.
6. Break any of these rules sooner than say anything outright barbarous.	Prefer the concrete word to the abstract

As further evidence that Orwell was mainly repeating the thought of his day, Bolton notes essential resemblances between "Politics" and The Art of Writing by Sir Arthur Quiller-Couch.

Quiller-Couch:

So long as you prefer abstract words, which express other men's summarised concepts of things, to concrete ones which lie as near as can be reached to things themselves and are the first-hand material for your thoughts, you will remain, at the best, writers at second-hand (qtd. in Bolton 192).

Orwell:

When you think of something abstract you are inclined to use words from the start, and unless you make a conscious effort to prevent it, the existing dialect will come rushing in and do the job for you, at the expense of blurring or even changing you meaning (138).

Yet I don't want to criticize Orwell too harshly for being unoriginal. After all, my own paper is highly derivative, owing much to Bolton, Quirk, and others. The more serious charge is Orwell's shaky, perhaps naive theoretical underpinnings. Fundamentally, Orwell seems to view language as an object, something separate from ourselves. This view manifests itself throughout "Politics," in Orwell's unsound notions that language can be corrupted or engineered, and that a language controls thought and vice versa.

Let's begin with his assertion that language can be corrupted. Orwell makes his position clear from the first sentence of "Politics": "Most people who bother with the matter at all would admit that the English language is in a bad way" (127). Later he states "But if thought corrupts language, language can also corrupt thought" (137). His essay is full of words like "decay," "corrupt," and "decline." Such claims illustrate how Orwell reifies language, since they invite an analogy to substantial objects. Presumably, language can be debased, just as gold is debased by copper, or pure water is contaminated by oil spills.

But how does one measure "decay"? Few, if any, trained linguists would claim competency to measure "corruption." Of course, Orwell never rigorously defines what he means by corruption--presumably he assumes words like "corrupt," "decline," and "deteriorate" are self-evident. Yet speaking of language corruption presumes some standard from which the language has degenerated, and such a view naively overlooks the history of language. After all, language has changed continuously, so where do we find the standard? Is Shakespeare's English corrupt because it differs from Chaucer's? Is Dryden's English more corrupt than Shakespeare's? And what about all the languages descended from Indo-European? Are they all corrupt? Or in Bolton's terms, "is Spanish merely corrupt English?" (33). Certainly Orwell was right to confess he doesn't have "sufficient knowledge to verify that the German, Russian and Italian languages have all deteriorated in the last ten or fifteen years, as a result of dictatorship" (137), but he shouldn't have been any more confident about measuring

deterioration in English, either.

We might look to the contents of the essay--the "catalogue of swindles and perversions,"--to find what Orwell means by corruption, but unfortunately we only find complaints about current usages in English, not the language itself. "Staleness of imagery" and "vagueness of expression" reflect more on particular speakers of English than on English itself. He hasn't proved at all, and I doubt he can, that English lacks the resources to express ideas precisely; to do so he would have to show that no English speaker, including himself, is capable of precise expression. We can't really assent to such a position.

Orwell's materialist bent manifests itself again when he maintains language can be engineered or consciously changed and crafted for our purposes. Early on he speaks of language as "an instrument which we shape for our own purposes" (127), and later he explicitly claims: "the decadence of our language is probably curable. . . . Silly words and expressions have often disappeared, not through any evolutionary process but owing to the conscious action of a minority" (137-38). Of course Orwell's attitudes on language doctoring receive their most celebrated form in Newspeak, the language of 1984 in which words are stripped of secondary meanings, so that unorthodox expression is impossible.

But Orwell shouldn't be too confident of consciously-crafted change in language, since previous attempts to engineer language have largely failed. Admittedly, sexist language, such as "postman" and the generic "he," have generally been excluded from published writing, but perhaps we ought to regard such changes as conventions enforced by editors, like punctuation rules, since most people are still saying "salesman," regardless of what appears in print. Furthermore, Orwell's own examples undercut him, since "explore every avenue" and "leave no stone unturned" have certainly not been laughed out of existence as he claims (138). In fact, these stubborn phrases are much more common than several of the hackneyed phrases he still wants to eliminate, such as "iron heel," and "bloodstained tyranny."

Finally, Orwell treads on shaky ground again when he deals with the relationship between language and thought. Characteristically, he displays much more confidence than most who write about this complex relationship, as he writes his opinions boldly, even though no consensus has been reached. Essentially he espouses two contradictory views of the relationship between thought and language. On one hand he assumes we can think without language:

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. . . . Probably it is better to put off using words as long as possible and get one's meaning as clear as once an through pictures or sensations (138).

At another point, Orwell speaks of a writer who "is not seeing a mental image

of the objects he is naming; in other words he is not really thinking" (134).

On the other hand Orwell assumes language can take over the thought process entirely:

When you think of something abstract you are more inclined to use words from the start, and unless you make a conscious effort to prevent it, the existing dialect will come rushing in and do the job for you, at the expense of blurring or even changing your meaning (138).

Elsewhere he writes of "throwing your mind open and letting the ready-made phrases come crowding in" (135), and "appropriate noises coming out of [the] larynx, but [the] brain is not involved as it would be if [the speaker] were choosing his words for himself" (136).

So on one hand, thought creates words, on the other words create thought. How can both views be valid? But perhaps neither is, since each presents problems. Let's look more carefully at them, again emphasizing that most views on language and thought remain quite speculative.

Characteristically, Orwell fails to define language or thought. For someone complaining about imprecision, he leaves a lot of loose ends. But by inference, it appears he believes that thinking can be entirely separate from language. Somehow, we can apprehend the world **before** we speak. He describes a prelinguistic experience, in which we comprehend the world, presumably in images or sensations.

Now this seems sensible enough, after all, we've all experienced those moments in which we know (or at least think we know) what we want to say, but can't put it into words. Other times, our words don't seem to say what we really mean. But can this really be explained by saying we have a clear idea in our heads before we try to speak? Wicker disparages such a view, claiming it "insists that a prelinguistic experience of undifferentiated sensations gives an immediate knowledge of how things are, and so provides the basis for all certainties" (qtd. in Bolton 34-35). Much current philosophy rejects such a strong separation between language and thought. As Palmer explains,

Since we categorise the objects of our experience with the aid of language, it may be the case that learning about the world and learning about language are activities that can not be separated and that therefore our world is partly determined by our language (44).

Part of the problem again is Orwell's insistence on language as an object existing outside of the mind, instead of a system within the mind by which we interpret the world. In accordance with his materialist bent, he implies that language can and should correspond to something in the "real" world. For example, he writes

Words like *romantic, plastic, values, human, dead, sentimental, natural,*

*vitality*, as used in art criticism, are strictly meaningless, in the sense that they not only do not point to any discoverable object, but are hardly ever expected to do so by the reader (132).

Using language, then, consists of finding names for conceptions we've already arrived at.

It's not likely, however, that language works through such simple correspondences. Current views, such as Sausurrean semiotics, reject external references. (Bolton points out fairly that while Sausurre's lectures were published in 1916, they weren't translated into English until 1959. It's understandable that Orwell wouldn't have been influenced by them (38)). Sausurre interprets language as a closed system in which a signified (sound or written symbol) corresponds to a signifier (concept within a system, not at all tied to an external referent). The language system is entirely autonomous, and allows us, as Bolton points out, to say such things as "a four-sided triangle," even though we'll never find one in the external world (Bolton 35).

The other assumption Orwell implies is that language can take over the thought process. At his extreme, Orwell says "ready made phrases come crowding in [to your mind]. They will construct your sentences for you--even think your thoughts for you, to a certain extent." Although he qualifies his remark with "to a certain extent," his other remarks clearly show that he regards that certain extent as extensive indeed--that words almost entirely take up our thought process. Again this seems sensical--at least we have known those who parrot words without really paying attention to what they are saying. But does that mean the words are doing the thinking for them? I think what he really means is that we pass on a phrase we have heard without exploring its underlying implications and assumptions, without investigating its details. Were we to do so, we might not agree with the phrase. In the sense that we don't pursue the possibilities suggested by a phrase we aren't extending our thinking, but we can't say the words are doing the thinking for us. Again, the problem isn't with language, but with lazy speakers of the language.

In conclusion, I don't mean to undermine Orwell's contributions. He seems to speak sense to us, and we can probably benefit from his exhortations to be conscious of language, both our own and other's. But we ought to be careful not to make Orwell into a language expert. Instead let's remember that he was primarily a journalist who wrote clearly what he observed.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> I realize it's hard to tell just what Orwell meant to do with Newspeak--whether it is a satire on Ogden's Basic English, or whether it expresses Orwell's earnest beliefs about trends in language. But given his explicit statements in "Politics," it's clear Orwell thought such institutional language doctoring possible.



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