

Newspeak, the Linguistic Monster in George Orwell's *Nineteen Eighty-Four*

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*Power is power over human beings.
Over the body – but, above all, over the mind.
Power over matter – external reality, as
you would call it – is not important. (...) We
control matter because we control the mind.
Reality is inside the skull.
(Orwell, 2008: 333)*

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George Orwell's *Nineteen Eighty-Four* (1949) is his most important work, one which also enjoys undiminished popularity and political relevance. This dystopia, which is a novel of ideas, is populated with monsters, the proponents of the tyrannical regime of Oceania, who aimed at absolute control not only of people's bodies, but also of their minds, mainly through the 'rationalized' artificial language called Newspeak, which was meant to make all other forms of thought impossible. The importance of Newspeak in the construction of the argument of this novel is not only literary, but also linguistic; thus, *Nineteen Eighty-Four* is also considered Orwell's chief work of linguistics, one which has had lexicological effects in inspiring a host of further creations including *doublespeak*, *teenspeak* and *nukespeak*, besides the popularization of several slogans, including 'Big Brother is watching you'. In fact, language was one of Orwell's major concerns. This paper argues that from a linguistic viewpoint Newspeak is a monster in itself, completely frozen as it is, immune to change and other semantic processes, thus going against the principles on which any natural language is based.

Introduction

In 1948, during that grim decade, seriously ill with tuberculosis and depressed, George Orwell was undergoing treatment at Barnhill, an isolated cottage on the island of Jura, off the north coasts of Scotland. The room in which Orwell wrote his last and most famous book can still be visited today. The landscape which he contemplated through its small window was the backdrop against which the great writer struggled to put down on paper this most sombre work. Of *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, just after it succeeded, he said: "It wouldn't have been so gloomy if I hadn't been so ill" (Inglis & Spear, 1958: 658). Orwell did not live to see the enormous success of his last novel, as he never left the hospital, where he died in 1950. In English literature, Orwell is an example of the politically committed intellectual and one

of the most brilliant social critics. Anthony Burgess, in his inimitable style, characterizes Orwell in these words: “a born radical, champion of the small man who is ‘pushed around’ by bosses of all denominations and something of Swift’s ‘savage indignation’ as well as his humanitarianism is to be found in *Animal Farm* and *Nineteen Eighty-Four*” (1974: 223). Both these novels, as most of Orwell’s essays, continue to appeal to young people in particular.

***Nineteen Eighty-Four* (1948)**

Nineteen Eighty-Four, first published by Secker & Warburg in 1949 and which has exceeded 15 million copies sold worldwide, is the best example of the novel as a vehicle for ideas, such ideas which were clearly expressed in the essay “Why Write”, where Orwell wrote that his foremost intention was to turn political discourse into an art. Orwell was mainly preoccupied with construction and language issues – “good prose is like a window-pane” (1962: 167), while simplicity and clarity must characterize any work of fiction if it is to become an effective communication tool. In another essay, “Politics and the English Language” of 1946, he is concerned with “the vagueness and sheer incompetence of modern English prose” (321) and uses a series of Lockean oppositions to advocate the language of personal experience and the concrete, insisting that a word is chosen for its meaning, not for its verbal felicity. “Foolish thoughts” and “ugly, inaccurate language” (323) feed off each other. “Political language – and with variations this is true of all political parties, from Conservatives to Anarchists – is designed to make lies sound truthful and murder respectable, and to give an appearance of solidity to pure wind” (335). We may note that “Politics and the English Language” is as accurate and relevant today as it was on 1946. Similarly, *Nineteen Eighty-Four* equates jargon with corrupt power. George Orwell claimed that “in our age there is no keeping out of politics. All issues are political issues” (1946: 154). Currently, the adjective Orwellian describes totalitarian and authoritarian social practices, alongside several other expressions, such as “Big Brother”, “Thought Police”, “Two Minutes Hate”, “Room 101”, “memory hole”, “Newspeak”, “doublethink”, “unperson” and “thought crime”.

The opening sequence of *Nineteen Eighty-Four* is one of the most famous in literature: “It was a bright cold day in April, and the clocks were striking thirteen”. The allusions are clear. April from Chaucer’s ‘showres soote’ to Eliot’s *Waste Land*. David Lodge remarks that “It’s the anomalous word ‘thirteen’ that tells us with wonderful economy that a very different experience is in store” (1992: 135). Later we learn that the “bright cold day” is 4 April 1984, the day when the main character, Winston Smith, begins his diary. His keeping a diary is the first step to his becoming Winston Smith, rather than Citizen 6079 Smith W.

Nineteen Eighty-Four is a dystopia or anti-utopia, the original title of which was “The Last Man in Europe”, probably inspired by Winston Churchill, widely considered Europe’s last defender in WW2, before the American intervention. Written in 1948 in the above-mentioned dire circumstances, it describes Britain (called Oceania) following forty years of totalitarian dictatorship, evincing features of communism and fascism – a police state where terror is the rule. In Oceania, “the Party”, a cadre of megalomaniacal despots, wields absolute power. This regime has destroyed society as we know it, setting children against parents and wives against husbands, enforcing unwavering loyalty to “Big Brother”, the potentate whose Stalin-like countenance stares out balefully from posters no one can avoid” (Stern, 2018). The portraits of the dictator known by the oppressed population as Big Brother dominate all public spaces – “Big Brother is watching you”. Inside their homes, the citizens are constantly watched by a camera, while children are encouraged to inform on their parents. The Thought Police

promptly cracks down and amends all deliberate or unintentional transgressions of the totalitarian rules: “A totalitarian country is one where everything that is not prohibited is compulsory” (Orwell, 1962: 336). Orwell himself described his novel as a parody (Crick, 1980: 565–566), while Pimlott, in his 1989 introduction to the Penguin edition of the novel, described it “as a non-fiction essay disguised as horror-comic fiction” (1989: viii). The main means of control of society in *Nineteen Eighty-Four* is Newspeak.

Besides the thought control of all citizens, the authorities are engaged in rewriting history in accordance with party precepts. The main character, Winston Smith, “obviously named for Winston Churchill” (Lodge, 1992: 136), is an intellectual party member, entrusted with the manipulation of facts. One day, he receives an assignment (always in Newspeak): “times 3.12.83 reporting bb dayorder doubleplusungood refs unpersons rewrite fullwise upsub antefiling”. Orwell translates: “The reporting for Big Brother’s Order for the Day in the *Times* of December 3rd 1983 is extremely unsatisfactory and makes references to nonexistent persons. Rewrite it in full and submit your draft to higher authority before filing” (2008: 49). Winston Smith later rebels against this activity and plots to destroy the system, but in the end is arrested and brain-washed into conformity. The true merit of the novel resides in its description and detailing of the political mechanisms of totalitarianism, an analysis which continues to be considered relevant in contemporary society. Lyotard’s *The Postmodern Explained to Children* (1992), for example, imagines the continuing truth of Orwell’s 1984 to consist in the fragility of individuality and creativity in a world of organised communication systems reproducing dominant discourses.

From a stylistic perspective, *Nineteen Eighty-Four* contains more than one type of discourse: the complex one of Winston Smith, which is made up of slogans and Newspeak fragments from the Ministry of Truth, excerpts from his personal diary as well as the song of the prole; Emmanuel Goldstein’s “Theory and Practice of Oligarchical Collectivism” and the Appendix on “The Principles of Newspeak”; all are integrated by the omniscient 3rd person narrative, made up of short, concrete sentences, in the journalistic style. Orwell was aiming at the “zero writing degree” (*le degré zéro de l’écriture*), “a styleless style effacing itself before the directly experienced reality” (Easthope, 1999: 158). This is writing which foregrounds its own textuality.

Newspeak, the Linguistic Monster

The Merriam Webster Dictionary definition of Newspeak is “propagandistic language marked by euphemism, circumlocution, and the inversion of customary meanings”. Lexicographer John Ayto’s Oxford Dictionary of 20th Century Words defines Newspeak as “the name of the artificial language used for official communications in George Orwell’s novel *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, often applied to any corrupt form of English, especially the propagandist and ambiguous language of some politicians, broadcasters, etc. It became the inspiration for a range of neologisms ending in *-speak*” (1999: 290), including *doublespeak*, a blend of *Newspeak* and *Doublethink*, which describes any word which deliberately hides or changes a meaning in order to achieve an ulterior motive. *Newspeak* itself has become a term in the language at large for misleading (especially political) jargon, and is the source for a large number of words modelled on it, such as *nukespeak* and *teenspeak* (McArthur, 1992: 693).

In the text of his novel, Orwell describes Newspeak at great length:

It was intended that when Newspeak had been adopted once and for all and Oldspeak forgotten, a heretical thought – that is, a thought diverging from the principles of Ingsoc – should be literally unthinkable, at least so far as thought is dependent on words. Its vocabulary was so constructed as to give exact and often very subtle expression to every meaning that a Party member could properly wish to express, while excluding all other meanings and also the possibility of arriving at them by indirect methods. 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. (2008: 377)

The final form of Newspeak was a work in progress, since “an enormous team of experts”, including Syme, were working on the 11th edition of the Newspeak dictionary, with its final implementation completed by the year 2050. It is important to note that Newspeak is presented in the novel as being a work in the making, and no extended example of its use appears anywhere. It is mainly introduced by Syme, and by Orwell himself at the end of the novel. Thus the reader may well wonder how the people of Oceania were supposed to use a language which existed only in written form. The Newspeak language engineers completely ignored both the diachronic and the social aspect of any language. Newspeak was completely frozen, immune to change and other semantic processes, thus going against the principles on which any natural language is based. These features in themselves helped make Newspeak a linguistic monster. The etymology of the word *monster* shows that it is derived from the Latin *monstrum*, a portent.

According to American linguist Whitney F. Bolton, “Orwell’s inspiration for Newspeak probably included the artificial languages in Jonathan Swift’s *Gulliver’s Travels* (1726), Evgeny I. Zamyatin’s *We* (1920-1921), C. K. Ogden’s *Basic English* (1930), Aldous Huxley’s *Brave New World* (1932), and H. G. Wells’ *The Shape of Things to Come* (1933)” (1992a: 128). Indeed, Marx identified the function of words with that of ideology in society, namely the distortion of reality, while viewing language as hypocritical phraseology. No wonder then that he exalted labour against intellectual pursuit and believed language to hamper thinking. Hannah Arendt later observed that “violence is nothing more than the most flagrant manifestation of power” (1970: 128).

In the Appendix, entitled ‘The Principle of Newspeak’, Orwell further explains that “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” (Orwell, 2008: 376-377). Syme asks Winston Smith: “Don’t you see that the whole aim of Newspeak is narrow the range of thought? (...) Every year fewer and fewer words, and the range of consciousness always a little smaller” (2008: 67). “Most words in Newspeak are removed by selecting a basic term, for example ‘good’, rather than the possible range of ‘fine, nice, excellent, ok, well, lovely, pleasant, superb, brilliant’ and so on) and then allowing a small set of very regular inflections (‘gooder, ungood, goodest, plusgood, doubleplusgood’)” (Mullany & Stockwell, 2010: 112).

Newspeak Vocabulary

Newspeak words were divided into three distinct classes, known as the A vocabulary, the B vocabulary (also called compound words), and the C vocabulary. “The A vocabulary consisted of the words needed for the business of everyday life – for such things as eating, drinking, working, putting on one’s clothes, going up and down stairs, riding in vehicles, gardening, cooking, and the like. (...) It was intended only to express simple, purposive thoughts, usually involving concrete objects or physical actions” (Orwell, 2008: 378). “The B vocabulary consisted of words which had been deliberately constructed for political purposes: words, that is to say, which not only had in every case a political implication, but were intended to impose a desirable mental attitude upon the person using them. Without a full understanding of the principles of Ingsoc it was difficult to use these words correctly” (381). “The C vocabulary was supplementary to the others and consisted entirely of scientific and technical terms. These resembled the scientific terms in use today, and were constructed from the same roots, but the usual care was taken to define them rigidly and strip them of undesirable meanings”. And Orwell tersely concludes his presentation of the three vocabularies of Newspeak with these words:

From the foregoing account it will be seen that in Newspeak the expression of unorthodox opinions, above a very low level, was well-nigh impossible. It was of course possible to utter heresies of a very crude kind, a species of blasphemy. It would have been possible, for example, to say BIG BROTHER IS UNGOOD. But this statement, which to an orthodox ear merely conveyed a self-evident absurdity, could not have been sustained by reasoned argument, because the necessary words were not available. (2008: 389)

Thus, Newspeak is reconstructed or ‘rationalized’ language, which is thus made controllable. Words are formed by means of prefixes, e.g. *minitruth*, *doubleplusgood* vs *doubleplusungood*, as well as compounding and abbreviation, e.g. *miniluv*, *doublethink* (‘accepting contradictory beliefs’), *Ingsoc* (‘English socialism’), *thinkpol* (‘think police’), *crimethink* (‘thought crime’), *Pornosec* (the pornography section of the Ministry of Truth), *ficdep* (fiction department), *recdep* (Records Department), *prolefeed*, *duckspeak* or *blackwhite*, mainly lexicological blends”. Do you know the Newspeak word *goodthinkful*? Meaning naturally orthodox, incapable of thinking a bad thought?”... Winston asks Julia (166). David Crystal aptly refers to these creations as “Orwellian CompoundSpeak” (1995: 135). In the second paragraph of the book, Orwell uses a revealing compound – *Hate Week*, besides the reference to the enormous coloured poster with the words BIG BROTHER IS WATCHING YOU (2008: 3). These are the only two unfamiliar details in what appears to be an ordinary day in the contemporary world. The use of compound words and abbreviations helped “separate the words from their conscious and unconscious connotations” (Shadi, 2018: 185). The meanings of all Newspeak words are ideological.

It must be noted that while these techniques of word-formation are typical of English vocabulary, words composed of truncated syllables appear to have been popular in totalitarian regimes. The stems from which these lexical creations were formed are to a great extent Germanic, as a reflection of Orwell’s strong ideas concerning the modern trend to replace Anglo-Saxon words with classical ones. Another issue addressed by Newspeak is that of political euphemism, seen as a method of concealing truth, as The Ministry of Truth is in fact

The Ministry of Propaganda and The Ministry of Love is The Ministry of Repression. The standardization of language entails the standardization of thought. Moreover, Newspeak is also an example of linguistic determinism. Claudio Magris, the Italian scholar of German literature and literary historian of Central Europe, describes this process as “massacrer la langue”: “rouillant ainsi les cartes, intervertissant les rôles des victimes et des bourreaux, abolissant les distinctions et les hiérarchies en de crapuleuses orgies de concepts et de sentiments qui altèrent la vérité” (2001: 41). Such standardization was in fact nothing less than totalitarian prescriptivism:

‘The Eleventh Edition is the definitive edition’, he said.

‘We’re getting the language into its final shape – the shape it’s going to have when nobody speaks anything else. When we’ve finished with it, people like you will have to learn it all over again. You think, I dare say, that our chief job is inventing new words. But not a bit of it! We’re destroying words – scores of them, hundreds of them, every day. We’re cutting the language down to the bone. The Eleventh Edition won’t contain a single word that will become obsolete before the year 2050 (...) ‘It’s a beautiful thing, the destruction of words. Of course the great wastage is in the verbs and adjectives, but there are hundreds of nouns that can be got rid of as well. (Orwell, 2008: 65-66)

Orwell himself remarked in the Appendix that “telescoped words and phrases had been one of the characteristic features of political language; and it had been noticed that the tendency to use abbreviations of this kind was most marked in totalitarian countries and totalitarian organizations” and also that abbreviations are effective in the reorganization of language because they remove the full meaning and context that nonabbreviated words carry. In addition, abbreviations and shortened words suggest “a tightly-knit organization and a well-defined body of doctrine” (386-387).

Newspeak Grammar

“The grammar of Newspeak had two outstanding peculiarities. The first of these was an almost complete interchangeability between different parts of speech. Any word in the language (in principle this applied even to very abstract words such as IF or WHEN). (...) The word THOUGHT, for example, did not exist in Newspeak. Its place was taken by THINK, which did duty for both noun and verb” (378-379).

The second distinguishing mark of Newspeak grammar was its regularity. Subject to a few exceptions which are mentioned below all inflexions followed the same rules. Thus, in all verbs the preterite and the past participle were the same and ended in -ED. The preterite of STEAL was STEALED, the preterite of THINK was THINKED, and so on throughout the language. (...) The only classes of words that were still allowed to inflect irregularly were the pronouns, the relatives, the demonstrative adjectives, and the auxiliary verbs. (380-381)

“*WAR IS PEACE. FREEDOM IS SLAVERY, IGNORANCE IS STRENGTH*” were the three slogans of the party Ingsoc, as detailed by Goldstein in his theory. “Freedom is the freedom to say that two plus two make four. If that is granted, all else follows” (2008:103). The word *free* only existed in Newspeak to communicate the absence of something, e.g. “The dog is

free from lice” or “This field is free of weeds”. It may be noted that later O’Brien casually reveals that he together with a committee wrote Goldstein’s book. No references to the syntax of Newspeak are made.

Thus, Newspeak is “English re-engineered through massive vocabulary reduction and shifts of meaning. It is controlled by the Party, whose head, Big Brother, is a symbol rather than an actual person. A small Inner Party use Newspeak to control the minds of the larger Outer Party” (Joseph, 2004: 352). This scenario is well-known to the former citizens of communist states (see, for example, ‘*newspeak-ul ceausist*’ in Blaga, 2007: 353) as well as ‘*nouvorba*’ (Zafiu, 2007: 16), besides Young (1991). However, the practical experience of language which lies at the heart of the activity of all human beings means that every speaker is steeped in conscious and unconscious metalinguistic activity, including wordplay and verbal play in all forms. Language play in all its forms appears to be one of the central functions of language, rendered impossible by the tyrannical restrictions of Newspeak.

The principles on which Newspeak is based can be further argued to underlie the present-day moves towards ‘political correctness’ in language: “‘The new McCarthyism’, ‘thought police’, ‘Orwellian’, ‘Fascist’ and ‘totalitarianism’, among the favoured terms, conjure up a *Nineteen Eighty-Four* world of inexpressibility, constriction, and savage repression” (Lakoff, 2000: 98). In fact, Noam Chomsky has addressed ‘Orwell’s problem’ from the viewpoint of the limits of knowledge: how it is possible for us to know so little when we have at our disposal so much information; this limitation being an effect of propaganda through language (see 1988, interviews in *Language and Politics*).

Roger Fowler has noted that “the proponents of Newspeak language take an extreme nominalist position” (1995: 225). A nominalist position claims that no universal or abstract concepts exist outside the mind. Rather, it makes sense to talk of mere names without a corresponding reality, or put even more simply: meanings derive from words, not the other way around – as would be a fundamentally ‘realist’ view of language.

The ending of *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, like that of *Animal Farm*, has been described as amounting to “an affirmation that endeavour and effort are futile”, as supported by “a set of assumptions common to Orwell’s work generally, two of which can be stated bluntly: that human beings betray each other, and that among the species generally considered, intellectuals can be relied upon to be not only worse than most but the prime enemy” (Jacobs, 1994: 237).

Conclusions

Nineteen Eighty-Four is widely considered Orwell’s major work on language.

The first linguist to have noted Orwell’s relevance to understanding language was J. R. Firth, whose work was continued and expanded by M. A. K. Halliday, who outlined a structuralist model of text analysis based on the identification of the ideology which underlies the use of language. Halliday’s systemic-functional grammar paved the way for Roger Fowler’s ‘critical linguistics’ (Fowler *et al.*, 1979) and ‘critical discourse analysis’. Noam Chomsky too has claimed Orwell as one of his intellectual influences.

Edelman’s empirical study of political language and symbols drew upon Orwell’s ideas, concluding that “both the perception of fact and value connotations hinge on the adequacy and character of the available vocabulary” (1964: 120).

An underlying principle of Newspeak is that anything that cannot be said cannot be thought either. A question prompted by this principle is to what extent our conception of reality is defined by language, a question addressed by the Sapir-Whorf hypothesis, the extreme

form of which is known as linguistic determinism. The hypothesis, now widely accepted in its weaker ('linguistic relativism' form), holds that the semantic structure of a person's native language either determines or limits the ways in which they are able to form conceptions of the world in which they live, or, simply put, our language determines our perception of the world. This idea is clearly expressed by Orwell in the text of his novel in the quote on page 377 of the 2008 edition. The principles of Newspeak are grounded in this hypothesis.

Newspeak is the 20th century's literary archetype of linguistic terror. The Newspeak of *Nineteen Eighty-Four* is not evil simply because it is artificial, but because its goals are untruth and mind control, and because its means to this end are the suppression of words for forbidden concepts (like *honour*, *justice*) and the ready conversion of parts of speech (like the verb *speak* as a noun, instead of *speech*). "Orwell was in most ways a language conservative while he was a social individualist and a political adherent of 'democratic socialism', as he called it. His books sometimes champion those who speak non-standard English, but his essays severely oppose linguistic change and by implication condemn the diversity that change brings" (Bolton, 1992b: 733).

Thus Newspeak, i.e. the manipulation of and through language – is a two-step process: the basic proposition, as pointed out above, is that meanings derive from words. It follows that the Party, as the sole creator and regulator of Newspeak language, also will determine meanings, thereby excluding all of which may conflict with the principles of their rule. To this nominalist position, the proponents of Newspeak add an extreme determinism: they believe that thoughts are controlled by words (Fowler, 1995: 225). The words of the Party, which are the only words available to the Oceanic language community, will therefore reside in the minds of the Party members, dictating the way they think and express themselves. Language in Oceania thus functions to isolate not only the individual but also, by denying the citizens any knowledge of foreign languages and cultures, the whole community as a group. When Newspeak has brainwashed the people of Oceania into complete servility, persons will have been reduced to mouths that utter, incapable of any practical metalinguistic activity.

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