

George Orwell on Language

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Who can resist writing on George Orwell now that the year has finally come? Next year will be too late, just as last year was too early. And besides, most of what one sees about language matters in the popular press reflects some of the same concerns about public language that Orwell had. Notice I said "some of the same concerns", because Orwell knew that the real culprit in the linguistic doublespeak was insincerity and purposeful deceit, not faulty language structure. And here Orwell was streets ahead of the trivial journalese about the nature of language and public speech. The problem is not the imprecision of language, nor is it slovenly thinking because of slovenly language. In "Politics and the English Language" (in "Shooting an Elephant" and Other Essays, 1945), Orwell put the blame squarely where it belongs. Very simply, the

great enemy of clear language is insincerity. When there is a gap between one's real and one's declared aims, one turns as it were instinctively to long words and exhausted idioms, like cuttlefish squirting out ink.

It is the purposeful manipulation of language and the malicious attempt at disinterested innocence that needs our criticism, not the inherent imprecision of words.

After all, the words are there, and they are there to be used. They are often inherently ambiguous, and difficult of definition in either their quantity or their quality. The use of old words in new contexts is the most common way the language grows in its vocabulary development. Words are like sand dunes, constantly shifting. The dune keeps shifting its position, so that one never really finds it in the same place; words do much the same thing, appearing with this nuance here and with that connotation there. And there are advantages to this system of vocabulary growth. For example, Newtonian

physics works well on the level of physical observation, but does not answer the problem presented by particle physics. The macrophysics of the universe offered by quantum mechanics and Newtonian physics stand in contradiction to one another, and so we purposely change the vocabulary of science to deal with these new developments, or to deal with two concurrently competing theories of this one aspect of human knowledge. We do this either by making up new words ('quark'), or by pressing old ones into new service ('radiation belt', 'solar storm').

Language obviously need not and often does not match up to reality in any direct fashion. For example, a sentence like 'The Russians have discovered an element lighter than hydrogen' could be something to worry about. Assuming that it is true, the entire macrophysics of the world we know could be changed, chemical valences would have to be shifted about, and so on. While those technical aspects of our lives would change dramatically, the language does not register apoplexy, nor do we. The sentence stands as an utterance whether or not it has any truth value. Even trying to rid ourselves of sentences which are not seen as true is not necessarily a laudable exercise, for how else are new hypotheses to be tried on for size without linguistically constructing the models? The elasticity of language allows us an immediate testing ground to try out all manner of new ideas in either new meanings or new words in a no-win/no-loss situation.

Indeed, this must be what the editors of the OED call our attention to when writing their introductory remarks:

The vocabulary of a widely-diffused and highly cultivated living language is not a fixed quantity circumscribed by definite limits. That vast aggregate of words and phrases which constitutes the vocabulary of English-speaking men presents, to the mind that endeavors to grasp it as a definite whole, the aspects of one of those nebulous masses familiar to the astronomer, in which a clear and unmistakable nucleus shades off on all sides, through zones of decreasing brightness, to a dim marginal film that seems to end nowhere, but to lose itself imperceptibly in the surrounding darkness (General Explanations, Volume I, p. xxvii).

Of course, the more blatant misapplications of words we may term mistakes; when they occur off the mark in the style of Sheridan's Mrs. Malaprop or of the modern Archie Bunker, we may ridicule them as malapropisms. But other instances that are more subtle we may simply fail to register, and the words slowly shift their positions. Such linguistic misdemeanors in other circumstances, if purposefully produced and not uttered naively, might even be considered exceptionally clever. Indeed, some strive for just such linguistic effect in punning, and admirers of the Ogden Nash style would note these as creative or even clever.

The problem arises when there is a conscious attempt to use language to turn our perceptions to specific social and political ends. In such a purposefully imprecise semantic world, words can mean anything, and all too often they are twisted around to have their opposite meaning. We may look with some amusement at 1984 sloganeering like 'War is Peace', 'Freedom is Slavery', and 'Ignorance is Strength', but these paradoxical koan are not that far from the public prose that some sources now turn out at an alarming rate. And the conviction with which they are promoted makes Humpty Dumpty's ex cathedra pronouncements look mild.

"When I use a word," Humpty Dumpty said in rather a scornful tone, "it means just what I choose it to mean -- neither more nor less."

"The question is," said Alice, "whether you can make words mean so many different things."

"The question is," said Humpty Dumpty, "which is to be the master -- that's all." (from Lewis Carroll, "Through the Looking Glass and What Alice Found There", London: Mac-Millan, 1872, p. 118)

The world boasts of 'people's republics', 'people's democracies', 'liberation movements', and a host of other 1984 semantic doubletalk niceties. Reality has itself managed to improve an Orwell's topsy-turvy tongue-in-cheek terminology; even our own society accepts an endless list of self-serving euphemisms like 'surgical strikes', 'clean bombs', 'sanction without extreme prejudice', 'dropping of ordinance on target', not to mention some well-meaning

euphemisms like 'exceptional children'. We even hire salaried professionals whose main task it is to treat language as if they were Super Bowl quarterbacks -- take the verbal ball and run with it as far as possible without being pinned down. To use Orwell's term, we have an abundance of 'doubleplus-good duckspeakers', public or institutional orators whose abilities lie solely in being able to 'make articulate speech issue from the larynx without involving the brain centers at all.'

Forty years has done little to diminish the work force in this growth industry, and the following observations from Orwell's 1945 essay on "Politics and the English Language" (in "Shooting an Elephant" and Other Essays, 1945), could just as easily have been penned as a description of world events in some quarters of the globe four days, four weeks, or four months ago.

In our time, political speech and writing are largely the defence of the indefensible ... but only by arguments which are too brutal for most people to face, and which do not square with the professed aims of political parties. Thus political language has to consist largely of euphemism, question-begging and sheer cloudy vagueness. Defenceless villages are bombarded from the air, the inhabitants driven out into the countryside, the cattle machine-gunned, the huts set on fire with incendiary bullets: this is called pacification. Millions of peasants are robbed of their farms and sent trudging along the roads with no more than they can carry: this is called transfer of population or rectification of frontiers. People are imprisoned for years without trial, or shot in the back or the neck or sent to die of scurvy in Arctic labour camps: this is called elimination of unreliable elements. Such phraseology is needed if one wants to name things without calling up mental pictures of them.

Our quarrels with public language are, of course, far less severe. And while we expect some candor and clarity in public language, we certainly need not stand passively by and allow the language to use us. The best antidote to the linguistic gymnastics of others is honing our own sense of the language so that we know what it can be used to say. This simply negates any exercise in linguistic deception, and everyone returns to square one in terms of what

is really meant. Only as long as a fish is fooled by a lure is that lure still effective; when he is no longer so gullible, one may as well troll with old tires for all the good it will do. Besides, the miscellaneous list of social problems which vex many are not language problems, they are human problems. Speaking candidly or correctly solves none of them immediately; speaking clearly might, but those who wish to lie, posture, or evade will likely still do so. And those who do not wish to accept another's views are not likely to do so with any greater alacrity because the one side has spoken clearly. The problem, one suspects, is not a linguistic one; it is a comment on the human condition.

We all know Orwell's (1945:131) description of Newspeak whose purpose

was not only to provide a medium of expression for the world-view and mental habits proper to the devotees of Ingsoc (English Socialism), but to make all other modes of thought impossible. 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.

But thinking is not exclusively dependent upon words. While it is true that language manipulations have their effect on us, they do not entirely channel our modes of cognitive behavior. They may lead -- or mislead -- us down certain paths, but the ultimate responsibility is ours. Thought and language are not the same, never have been and never will be. And besides, is there really such a place where everyone without exception says what they mean and means what they say? Unfortunately, the society we inhabit is filled with vested interests, like used-car salesmen, ad-men, public relations men, and press secretaries who are all paid to push a product rather than to make sure that all the little nuances are spelled out for us clearly and unequivocally. But, while most of us are intrigued with a society where everyone means what they say, one doubts that having everybody say what they think all the time would be Utopia.

It is true that, if there is any one issue to be concerned about in the matter of public language, it is candor and clarity in its use. In many of its uses, the public language suffers from its being the vehicle of purposeful misconception rather than communication. Correctness can always be achieved by attention to a small number of mechanical details, but prevaricating humans seem to always find a polysyllabic tree to hide behind. Some sense of linguistic outrage at the failure to call a moral spade a spade is appropriate here, for although language can always be used to deceive and manipulate, it need not be. The deliberate playing of hide-and-seek behind polysyllabic pronouncements is a worthy cause for concern, but it is ultimately our responsibility to not be taken in by the rich thesaurus of public semantics.

Then too, we are ourselves partially to blame for the florid prose which is found in such abundance. Erudition seems to be measured by polysyllabicity, and for many the verbal golden rule seems to be 'the bigger the better'. And so we get what we deserve. If we continue to tolerate, even admire, such prolixity on the part of our public and private interactions, then we are ultimately responsible for the level of language we receive. It is a romance we have with the cult of the unintelligible, and the storyline goes something like this: the more obtuse a discussion is, that is, the less we seem to understand it, and the more erudite it sounds, the more likely we are to accept it as important or valuable. On the contrary, the more the discussion is couched in plain language, the less likely we are to accept it; we will probably end up by rejecting the speaker and his notions. This is because of the quality of the words, not the quality of the message. Too often we expect people of importance to beat around the bush, to be less accessible verbally and otherwise; we look to them not so much to give answers as to fill roles, even if those roles carry empty lines.

We may be trendy and read articles and books which decry the use of flatulent baffle-gab in public messages, and then do the same ourselves when we are the message-givers. We overtly decry 'baffle-gab', 'gobble-dygook' and 'officialese', but we commit the same sins when we are the official message-senders or message-receivers. Besides, it is so safe; if no one understands what you really mean, then no one can pin you down and you cannot be held

responsible. It is a way of promoting one's linguistic security and it in turn promises other kinds of security. The vagueness of some forms of language enables one to maintain a comfortable position, where ultimately one does not have to be held responsible for any more than he wishes to. Too many of us may be comfortable with such a linguistic position, and this linguistic phlegmaticity is probably more Orwellian in consequence than erasing a few politically naughty words from the language.

Returning to the theme that clear language and clear thinking will go hand in hand, we may be expecting too much. Many are clear thinkers in that their hard and fast choice is to use exactly that muddled speech that we find so uninformative. This is often a conscious strategy. Whether we can expect our mentors and our confreres to speak better English so we can better know what they are talking about is doubtful. We can expect it, but one doubts that it will ever occur. But even if this event comes to pass, it is not the language which will be at fault or open to praise, for its workings have always been there. It is just that we have too many individuals who avail themselves of the natural ambiguity of language more often than they need to. If there is a moral here, it is that we should teach ourselves that the criteria by which we measure the true worth of an individual's verbal contribution are not necessarily those surface characteristics by which we initially note his speech. But this is a homily which goes back to the great Christian precepts, though its antiquity does not seem to have made much impression on us. We must remind ourselves that language can be used as the great deceiver, not because of its inherent malice, but rather because of our gullible expectations about what language will tell us. Others will thus often use it in the ways our gullibility suggests they will derive the greatest benefit from. Rather than correcting their manipulative usage of the language, we may be better protected by correcting the threshold values of our gullibility factor. This is where our efforts will probably do us the most good personally, and this strategy is one that we can expect the most reasonable level of success with in this year of Orwellian consciousness-raising.