

ORWELL AND THE REDUCTIONISM OF LANGUAGE

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- **ABSTRACT:** This essay demonstrates the existence of a semi-conscious belief in which language is considered as a natural development and not as an instrument that enables each speaker to give it form depending on their own purposes. For Orwell, it is clear that behind the decline of language there are economic and political causes and that these causes are not simply due to the bad influence of the writer. What is occurring to the English language and language in general is that it is becoming more inaccurate because language is in crisis.
- **KEYWORDS:** Language. Crisis. Orwell. Fragmentation. Manipulation.

Introduction

In the essay *Politics and the English Language*, Orwell (2008) says that just as Western civilization is decadent, so does language inevitably share in the same fate. In the same way, Herbert Marcuse (2002) in his work *One-Dimensional Man* describes the crisis of language:

In this world, words and concepts tend to coincide or rather, the concept tends to be absorbed by the word. The former has no other content than that designated by the word in to the standardized and publicized use, and in turn, it is expected that the word has no other implication than that which gives the form of conduct determined by publicized and standardized use. Thus, the word becomes *cliché* and, as a cliché, governs spoken or written language: communication prevents the genuine development of meaning. (MARCUSE, 2002, p. 90).

The process of conceptual innovation in language is poor due, in part, to a multiplicity of factors, including a disregard for language. Modern English, especially writing, is constituted by bad habits that are expanded by imitation and can be avoided if the speaker takes the necessary care. If the speaker manages to get rid of these bad habits, he or she can think more clearly as a necessary first step towards a political regeneration. To prove the inaccuracy of the English language, Orwell analyzes five passages in which two features common to all of them are evident: the wear of the images and the lack of

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precision. According to Orwell, the problem lies in the inability to specify the meaning, even to the point where an idea different from the original is expressed; in the worst case, the writer is indifferent to the fact that his or her words may come to mean something, to express something new. The mixture of vagueness and pure incompetence is one of the most marked characteristics in modern English, especially in any kind of political writing. It seems that modern prose consists less and less of words chosen according to their meaning, consisting, rather, of prefabricated phrases.

Orwell highlights several of the elements that have somehow worn the English language. For Orwell, new metaphors are elements that evoke a visual image in the mind. This language contains worn-out metaphors that have lost all their evocative power and are used simply as a way to avoid the discomfort of creating phrases. This creative feature is typical of language, and thus becomes necessary to create new ways of enriching language. Among the problems that Orwell identifies in the English language is the elimination of simple verbs; instead of being a single word, the verb becomes a phrase. There is an overuse of the passive voice instead of the active one and of nominal constructions instead of gerunds. Statements are given an air of depth through the use of Latin. The use of conjunctions and simple prepositions are replaced by composite constructions. Certain words are used to disguise simple affirmations and provide an air of scientific impartiality to biased judgments. The use of words of foreign origin, such as *cul de sac*, *ancien régime*, *status quo*, etc. are expected to give an air of culture and elegance. Many of the writers who use these terms consider expressions from Latin or Greek to have more value than those from English. Orwell says that bad writers (be they political, sociological or scientific) are almost always attracted to the idea that words of Greek and Latin origin are better than those of Anglo-Saxon origin. The result of the use of these expressions causes a certain wear on language, particularly the English language.

As for words without meaning, Orwell affirms that in certain types of writing, such as literary criticism and art, it is normal to find great passages that are devoid, almost completely, of meaning. In art, there are terms that are strictly devoid of meaning and that do not point to any specific object. Modern prose tends to move away from the concrete. By using worn metaphors, similes, and idioms, the speaker saves a creative mental effort that makes the meaning of what is expressed vague. A similar phenomenon occurs in political discourse. For example, the word *fascism* currently means “something undesirable”. This has allowed for concepts to become devoid of their base meaning. Words such as democracy, socialism, freedom, patriotism, and justice each have different meanings (each of them having multiple meanings) that prevent the harmonizing of the variety of meanings. In the specific case of the word *democracy*, not only is there no single consensus for its definition, but in the attempt to impose one, one finds resistance from different sectors. Many of those using this type of discourse have their own definition; however, they make their audience believe that what they say is something quite different. Affirmations are made with the purpose of deception. For Orwell, other words are used with variable meanings, which in the majority of cases, turn out to be used in a dishonest way, such as class, totalitarian, science, progressive, reactionary, bourgeois, equality, among others.

The tendency of modern prose is far from concreteness. For Orwell, modern English has become a union of long strips of words that have been established in advance by someone else and not a conscious choice of words according to their meaning and/or the creation of images, both of these based on the principle of clarity of meaning. This style of writing is quite attractive once the habit has been acquired. With these prefabricated phrases, people not only do not have to worry about searching for new words but they also do not have to worry about the rhyme of their sentences, as these phrases are already organized in a resonant way. For example, when there is a rush to give a public speech, people usually fall into a pretentious and latinized discourse. In this type of discourse, metaphors, similes and prefabricated and vague idiomatic expressions are used that avoid both the speaker and the listener to make a mental effort. The primary objective of a metaphor is to evoke a visual image. When these images collide, it is taken for granted that writers do not see the mental image of the objects being named nor are they thinking. Therefore, they are not involved in the execution of a creative process. For Orwell, a scrupulous writer who intends to initiate this creative process must take into account at least four basic questions: What do I mean? What words will express it? What image or idiom will make it clearer? Is this image clear enough to give a certain effect? Given this possibility, one can choose to avoid this situation and simply open one's mind, allowing the prefabricated sentences to construct one's own sentences, even modeling one's own thoughts. Orwell states that this situation reaches such a critical point that the meaning of the sentences and the speech itself evades the speaker. It is at this point that the connection between politics and the degradation of language becomes more evident.

Currently, it is quite accepted that political writing is bad writing. Different political genres of writing, such as pamphlets, articles, manifestos, etc., have as a common denominator the difficulty in finding a fresh and vivid linguistic turn. When a writer mechanically repeats phrases such as "bestial atrocities", "the free peoples of the world", "bloody tyrannies", one has the feeling of not being in front of a human being. The person who uses this type of terminology seems to become a human machine whose noises leave his larynx but whose brain activity is not involved. This state of reduced consciousness, although not dispensable, is in any case favorable to political conformity. Currently, both speech and political writing are "the defense of the indefensible". In Orwell's time, phenomena such as the continuity of the British empire in India, the deportations and purges in Russia, and the fall of nuclear bombs in Japan were even capable of being defended with difficult fallacious arguments that did not conform with the objectives professed by the same political parties. In this way, political language consists basically of euphemisms and vagueness. The bombings carried out from the air onto defenseless populations, the displacements made from the countryside to the city, the slaughtered cattle, and the burning of villages were called "pacification". The process to which millions of peasants were stripped of their plots was called "population transfer or rectification of borders." People who were imprisoned for years without the right to a trial or who were executed or simply destined to die of scurvy in the Arctic fields – this phenomenon was called "elimination of dissociating elements". This terminology becomes necessary if one requires to name things without the need to invoke mental images.

A flamboyant style is in itself a kind of euphemism. For Orwell, Latin expressions are responsible for covering up the facts the way soft snow blurs contours and covers all detail. The great enemy of precise language is insincerity. All matters are political issues, and politics itself is thus a set of lies, evasion, madness, hatred and schizophrenia. Finally, Orwell concludes that Italian, German and Russian have suffered a process of deterioration as a result of dictatorships. It is not only thought that is able to corrupt language; the opposite also occurs. The misuse of language can be spread through tradition and imitation. A defense of the English language must begin that involves the choice of words according to meaning and not the other way around. All the considerations that have been made of language have not been in the literary use of language but in language as an instrument of expression of thought as opposed to concealment or abstention:

If you simplify your English, you are freed from the worst follies of orthodoxy. You cannot speak any of the necessary dialects, and when you make a stupid remark, its stupidity will be obvious, even to yourself. Political language - and with variations this is true of all political parties, from Conservatives to Anarchists - is designed to make the sound truthful and murder respectable, and to give an appearance of solidity to pure wind. (ORWELL, 2008, p. 363).

The literary production of Orwell demonstrates the timelessness of his work and his ability to understand contemporary political phenomena:

The importance he attaches to the exercise of power over individual consciences through subtle and refined mechanisms aimed at obtaining from the individuals a certain type of desired behavior; the need for them to believe in something, in whatever it is in order to confer meaning to existence; the necessary *doublethink* to be able to put up with some of the indigestible facts of reality; and the importance of the formation of masses in which individuality is lost and a fusion between homogeneous units occurs are only some of the features contained in his essayistic production... (ORWELL, 1957, p. 7-8).

Power and Self-deception

In the essay *Notes on Nationalism* (ORWELL, 1957), nationalism is described as a mental habit. Orwell speaks of nationalism as the supreme entity that gives meaning to existence. From there it is concluded that every mental process justifies any type of act. Orwell's sense of nationalism does not fall into the usual definition linked to a single race or a single geographical region. Within the definition of nationalism, Orwell considers the generalizations human beings are subjected to that even lead them to be labeled "good" or "bad". Nationalism is also linked to the identification with a nation or with another political unit that is beyond good and evil and whose only duty is to serve its own interests. Nationalism is strongly related to the desire for power. Every

nationalist seeks more power and prestige not for himself but for the unity in which he has chosen to submit his individuality. Nationalism does not depend directly on a country or government or on such units existing as such. The nationalist, once he has chosen a side, is convinced that this is the best, even when the facts affirm otherwise.

Nationalism is based on power and self-deception. Orwell characterizes nationalist thought in six different ways, among which is the obsession where no nationalist performs any kind of action without considering their own power unit as superior. Immersed in instability and in spite of the intensity, nationalist loyalties are transferable, that is, the great national leaders, for example, are not limited to a specific region. Finally, there is an indifference to reality “[...] all nationalists have the power of not seeing resemblances between similar sets of facts” (ORWELL, 1957, p. 25). Every action is good or bad depending on who executes it. From there, it is concluded that there is no type of monstrosity: use of hostages, forced labor, mass deportation, etc. The moral value of the facts depends on whether it is carried out by “ours”. “The nationalist is unaware of facts made by his own side and thinks that the past can be altered. There is a degree of indifference towards the objective truth which produces a fragmentation of the world and makes it difficult to know reality” (ORWELL, 1957, p. 25-27).

Totalitarianism: the Reduction of Critical Thinking, Historical Memory and the Degradation of Language

In his essay *Reflections on the end of the century: The discourse of illusion*, Rafael Vidal Jiménez (1999) views literature as the aesthetic product that reflects the political and social organization in which our culture unfolds. There has always been a need to unveil the way capitalists build upon their dreams. Indeed, it is capitalism in direct relation with technology, industrialization, social conflicts and the bourgeoisie. In *1984*, George Orwell (2001) makes a detailed description of power. In this work, all the elements that characterize the totalitarian regime are described in detail. If the initial idea behind *1984* was to describe the Stalinist regime, the aesthetic and ideological elements of this novel led Orwell to make a description of totalitarian power. In both Orwell and Marcuse, there is a description of authoritarian socialism in addition to a proposal to understand the mechanisms that underlie the supposed Western democracy that hit the mark. Western democracy is based on the distortion of information along with the manipulation of history, a Manichean treatment of the past, and the existence of a fallacious policy, all for ideological purposes.

The given in current political systems is a quick and constant updating of reality, making it difficult for our society to be aware of totalitarian messages. Orwell's work reveals two basic components. On the one hand, he takes into consideration the levels of operability of power, and on the other, he questions Western civilization itself. Orwell does not worry about revealing the follies implied by power, such as Mario Vargas Llosa of Peru or Frenchman Jean-Francois Revel can be seen as doing, nor does he offer an easy characterization of Western democracy. What is found in Orwell, rather, is a thinker

who develops a critique of both perceptions and preconceptions of reality as well as an acid evaluation of power and authority. The treatment of language in all its twists and distortions reveals the true interests of all totalitarian organizations: language as an expression of thought. In *1984*, doublethink and newspeak prevent criticism of the established system. Orwell links language and politics in order to relate political chaos with the decline of language. The crisis of language and memory reveals the degree of submission to which individuals are subject in a totalitarian system. In its simplifying uniformity, totalitarianism reduces critical thinking, minimizes historical memory and simplifies and degrades language. In the homogenization process:

[...] we can observe some traces that characterize mass society, where the permanence and subsistence of a humanist culture with axiological content and linked to the heritage of a high and critical tradition, seems heroic. Refined culture is supported and founded on a long humanist tradition, in a secular battle for the free expression of truth. (SÁNCHEZ DE MOVELLÁN, 1999, p.72).

What modernity has sought is the exhaustion of the inner life that responds to the uniformity (process of homogenization) of behavior, where the exterior invades the interior space of the individual. One of the great concerns of totalitarianism is the management of the past. According to Orwell, dictatorships have an obsession with controlling historical time.

Orwell's description of superfluous daily life is extremely striking, leading to the conclusion that:

[...] there is nothing more boring and monotonous than everyday life in any totalitarian regime. Tyrants are monotonous and routine, their meticulousness with the miniscule data of their job of controlling people's lives makes them incredibly predictable. Indeed, the irony lies precisely in that: in the terror inspired by the knowing that one can find death around the corner. It is even more frightening to know that it is a certainty, insofar as the quality of our life or our death depends on other men. (VIDAL JIMÉNEZ, 1999, p. 5).

Orwell always reveals a unique truth unveiled through intellectual work. Everyday life in a totalitarian environment has as its primary objective to prevent the individual from creating his own facts and to eliminate all possibility of existence on the basis of the imagination. Totalitarianism has always had a poor perception of the present; the spontaneity that is so tied up with the imagination and intellectual work has not had its space. Totalitarianism builds on a totally uncertain terrain "They (the tyrants), in general, are very worried as they build a tomorrow on the corpses of yesterday" (VIDAL JIMÉNEZ, 1999, p. 10).

1984 manages to describe all the tensions, manias and paranoias that the totalitarian regimes install in the population. The most daily rituals comply with the totalitarian logic of systematic control. It is worth noting that Orwell makes this description from a place where bourgeois democracy has boasted of a fluidity and, at the same time, of an

ideological and political restraint. Orwell demonstrates how the oligarchies, which have held power for years, see themselves as liberal and egalitarian organisms.

Political Systems as Inhibitors of Individual Freedom

What can really identify Orwell with real politics (realpolitik) is that the latter ignores any type of moral or ethical issue. An example of this can be found in the administration of Richard Nixon, which supported the coup d'état in Chile based on the seemingly imminent danger of the Salvador Allende regime. When Nixon appeared on television to describe acts of a brutal nature with a technical and morally indirect vocabulary, the language was assimilable to the official explanations of the endless strategic repositioning of the great powers in 1984. In the end, George Orwell seeks to value the basic need of every free individual, namely, that of exercising their own *self-control*. The demonization of the other is the prelude to war or murder. This demonization has been a key element in current politics, while in Orwell's literary work it has been a form of denunciation of totalitarian states.

It is known that what Orwell intended with 1984 was not the prediction of a future but rather a fictional political satire and the possibilities of the establishment of a new world order, a government where total control was exercised. Part of this control is strongly emphasized in opposites, as is the case with the slogan "War is peace". In the society of 1984, there are three super states Eurasia, Eastasia and Oceania, which by themselves are self-sufficient and therefore do not require trade with each other; however, those in power think that war is a good excuse to make people's minds stay occupied in something different from the government issues that directly concern the people - *panem et circenses* as the old policy of the Roman Empire prescribed. However, also to the extent that one of these states wins the war, people's lives will be "better" and "peace" may continue. At work here is *double-think*, whose functioning lies in being able to simultaneously and completely hold two contradictory beliefs in the mind of a person. According to Cristal Epps in his article *The Reflection of George Orwell* (EPPS, 2000), Orwell's political perceptions reflected in 1984 in the character of Winston Smith are due to his experiences in the British Broadcasting Company (BBC) in which he saw firsthand how distorted truths became linked to the propaganda. This led him to distrust people who were in positions of power or control and who influenced the general public. History is determined by the person in power. In his essay *Revising History*, Orwell (1957) examines the credibility of history and concludes that it is determined by the person or group that is in control. One of the goals of literary work as "political purpose" is to alter the political thinking of others, to change the world. There is a basic need in Orwell and it is to keep a record of history. Orwell describes writing as a "[...] historical impulse - a desire to see things as they are, to account for real events and store them for use in posterity" (EPPS, 2000, p. 3).

The character of Winston Smith is a direct personification of George Orwell. This statement can be verified through their political perceptions such as the skepticism so

marked by the media, his politically motivated writings and his way of seeing government figures. This is also shown in the great attraction that Orwell felt for a certain social class and all its surroundings. It is clear that *1984* will be remembered as the work that describes the risks of a totalitarian society, a work that invites readers to reevaluate the concept of individuality and community. The character of Winston Smith is a true reflection of George Orwell and the struggle to preserve a unique identity. The work immerses the reader both in the meaning and the means that society has to destroy individual identity. Orwell denounces the political systems that eliminate individual freedom. Orwell's message is that any society that has leaders with absolute power is destined to fail due to the inevitable tendency of leaders to manipulate power for personal benefit. Orwell mocks the claim that any society can be seen as fair and equitable; hence, one of the commandments in *Farm Rebellion* is transformed from "all animals are equal" to "but some animals are more equal than others" (ORWELL 1945, p. 71, p. 105). Orwell did not believe in the revolution as such. He believed that the revolution led to power and that once power is reached, there is a strong tendency to abuse it. For Orwell, the revolution was not the answer, he believed that it was not going to change society. Revolutions often have good intentions and provide new faces and a new rhetoric, but later, it becomes difficult to differentiate the new faces from the old. The answer to this form of revolution is the reform that at a given moment can bring about the much-desired change. *1984* plays with the idea of a totalitarian state that evolves to its most developed form. As is known, Orwell does not attempt to make a complete and accurate description of a world that lives under a totalitarian state: In February 1944, Orwell (1957, p. 110) writes in *As I Please* "The really frightening thing about totalitarianism is not that it commits 'atrocities' but that it attacks the concept of objective truth: it claims to control the past as well as the future". Rather, he gives an extreme example of what could occur in current societies. Before dying, Orwell presents this idea as follows "I do not believe that the kind of society I describe will necessarily arrive, but I believe that something resembling it could arrive"¹.

Conclusion

Orwell wants to uncover the underlying lie in political systems. *1984* shows how the human spirit, under the image of Winston, is reduced to the worst conditions. Winston, "the guardian of the human spirit", as he ironically calls O'Brien, is the only living person able to exercise free thought. Orwell demonstrates how political organizations are capable of reducing the individual in terms of their capacity for free thinking. The great crime of Winston is to exercise the right held by every individual to make their own decisions. Again and again, Orwell's main motivation is freedom and how totalitarianism has the capacity to make it useless. Winston's comment in his diary, "Freedom is the freedom to say that two plus two makes four", exposes Orwell's belief in the ability of the individual

¹ qtd. in Williams, 2018.

to make their own decisions. Orwell sees himself as the “objective consciousness of an entire society”:

First of all you have to realize, O’Brien says, that power is collective. The individual only has power if it has to be individual. Alone and free man will always suffer defeat. It has to be this way because man is mortal. But if the individual can subject himself completely, if he can escape from his identity, if he can let himself be engulfed so much by the Party that he is the Party, then he is all-powerful and immortal. Next, you have to realize that power is power over people, over the body and especially over the mind. [First of all, you have to realize, says O’Brien, that power is collective. The individual only has the power if he stops being an individual. The free man and only will be defeated. It has to be this way since man is mortal. But if the individual can control himself completely, if he can escape from his own identity, if he can be swallowed by the Party so much that he becomes the Party, then he will be all-powerful and immortal. Then, you have to be aware that power is power only with people, over the body and especially over the mind]. If you want a picture of the future, imagine a boot stamping on a human face - for ever.²

Since there was a direct criticism of Socialism in *1984*, the book was well received by the American people; however, it dismissed the idea that the book claimed that all ideologies that emerged in the mid-twentieth century were authoritarian. In many cases there were erroneous or skewed readings from *1984*. For 1949 Orwell writes:

My recent novel is NOT intended as an attack on Socialism or on the British Labor Party (of which I am a supporter) but as a show-up of the perversions to which a centralized economy is liable and which have already been partly realized in Communism and Fascism. I do not believe that the kind of society I describe will necessarily arrive, but I believe (allowing of course for the fact the book is a satire) that something resembling it could arrive. I believe that totalitarian ideas have taken root in the minds of intellectuals everywhere, and I have tried to draw these ideas out to their logical consequences.³

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- **RESUMO:** *Este ensaio demonstra a existência de uma crença semi-consciente na qual a linguagem é considerada como um desenvolvimento natural, não como um instrumento que permite para cada falante moldá-la de acordo com seus próprios propósitos. Para Orwell, é evidente que existem causas políticas e econômicas por trás do declínio da linguagem e que essas causas não são simplesmente devidas à má influência do escritor.*

² qtd. in Storgaard, 2018.

³ qtd. in Storgaard, 2018.

O que está acontecendo com o idioma inglês e a língua de um modo geral, é que esta se tornando mais imprecisa porque a linguagem está em crise.

- **PALAVRAS CHAVE:** *Linguagem. Crise. Orwell. Fragmentação. Manipulação.*

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