

## TO ‘NEWSPEAK’ OR TO ‘DOUBLESPEAK’ IN GEORGE ORWELL’S “NINETEEN EIGHTY-FOUR”

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### ABSTRACT

The paper delves into the issues of language in George Orwell’s dystopic novel Nineteen Eighty-Four and analyses the manner in which language is manipulated in the novel (see creation of Newspeak), but also on how he managed to anticipate a strong movement in language (towards what was later called by theorists, not by Orwell himself, Doublespeak). The manner in which the fictional politicians and linguists use and abuse language in the novel is seen as an anticipation of what politicians and the writers behind their speeches have been doing for the past three decades. The paper also analyses euphemisms as a main vehicle for the putting into practice of such language leading to the expansion of its use in other branches of life besides the political such as: the economic (advertising and business), the judicial, the scientific (especially medicine), the military fields use euphemisms to obscure and disguise with one intention or another.

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## 1. Introduction

Looking back on George Orwell's Nineteen Eighty-Four may seem superfluous – so many studies have been written on this novel, so many aspects of the novel have been analysed. But in fact, it is the newer studies on human mind and human language that impose a new view upon the novel and upon the most original of its creations – language (Newspeak and Doublespeak). The contemporary society has known and has been experiencing great changes brought about by the new technologies and new ideologies that certify Orwell's prescient view upon human society. That is why language has become so much more important as it is transmitted to us through so many media, in such a rapid manner, and, in a fast-paced society, with so many purposes: to attract readers (see newspapers, on line or in printed form), to attract electors (see the political campaigns, especially the invasive on line commercials), to attract clients (see the commercials on TV or on line again more and more invasive into the viewers' watching time), to attract supporters of a certain ideology (see the European policies and its "politically correctly formulated regulations).

From another perspective, what Romania experienced during the communist period (in terms of interdictions of speech and movement, induction of fear of the party and its leader, scarcity of produce on the market, imprisonment and torture of the ones who spoke against the regime and the wooden language that was imposed in the press and on intellectuals) is the abhorrent putting into the practice of life of the grim fictional society with its rules and regulations. More than this, the wooden language that such regime imposed contaminated even the world of arts (see the appearance of the proletcultist literature which span through almost the entire half of the 20th century in Romania). Additionally, the manner in which the political language, on the one hand, and the commercial language, on the other hand, are used nowadays in order to attract the benevolence of voters or clients, in order to manipulate them into accepting political views or products validate once more Orwell's prediction and validity of Newspeak, later upgraded to Doublespeak as a language meant to manipulate and deceive.

Analyzed either as anti-language (Halliday 1976) or as an condemnation of the Saussurian conventionalist view upon language (Joseph 2000), discussed as the negative model followed by politicians and advertisers who exploit at the maximum the mechanisms of Newspeak as a vehicle for Doublethink thus, leading to the emergence of Doublespeak (see Lutz 1989, 1996 and 1989/2015) or as an instrument to signal against the abusive power of a totalitarian regime and rise the flag of rebellion (Booker 1994, Fowler 1995, Sisk 1997, Suciu & Culea 2018, Collini 2020), Newspeak has always stirred the interest of theorists of language and never ceases to be actual because of its deep roots in society through the principles it enunciates.

## **2. Newspeak – then and now**

The declared function of Newspeak explained in the Appendix to the novel was “to diminish the range of thought” and make all other modes of thought outside the ideology of IngSoc impossible (Orwell 2003,p.344). Maybe the theories upon the direct effects of the reduction of language on the reduction of thought are not verifiable anymore, but the manipulative effects of language on one’s thinking are universally recognized. This is the principle on which Orwell based his novel – the power of this “ready-made weapon: language” through which people could be controlled, yet leaving them under the impression that they could express their individual will (Joseph 2000, p. 53). At the same time, in a more subtle manner, Orwell was also said to fight against standardization of language and therefore thought – that is why the proles are granted the right to use language as they wanted and this is how Oldspeak is so alive in their conversations.

Although Orwell’s invented language in Nineteen Eighty-Four is characterized by a continuous reduction of vocabulary, it is not this feature exclusively that limits people’s ability to express themselves, since words can and do usually have several meanings, but the fact that sometimes multiple meanings are eliminated and other times that both the denotative and connotative levels of words are chopped in order to convey only what its imposers allow – in the explanation of “The B vocabulary” in the Appendix the external narrator says that this class consisted of words intended to be

used with a political purpose and “to impose a desirable mental attitude upon the person using them” (Orwell 2003,p. 347). Therefore, the range of thoughts and feelings that speakers would have and would put into words becomes narrower, being directly proportional to the quantity of the remaining meanings. “All other meanings” that are unfavourable to the ones that this language imposed, are thus being excluded together with “the possibility of arriving at them by indirect methods”. One such example is the paradigm “free”:

“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.” (Orwell, 2003,p. 344).

Newspeak, as it is called, is a language whose “two outstanding peculiarities” (2003,p.345) can be seen as strongly linked to its speakers, for these describe both its features and the way in which the people of Oceania are treated. The fact that the parts of speech of Newspeak can be used interchangeably, i.e. almost every word could be transferred from a category to another, becoming a verb, noun, adverb, or adjective, could suggest that the inhabitants of Oceania have an insignificant status, being easily eliminated and replaceable with/replaced by another when needed. Moreover, in the same manner in which words are formed in Newspeak (with abusive variations from the same stem) the inhabitants of Oceania lack any individual traits, they seem to be formed by the same mould which is also implied by the way in which they (are forced to) dress (everybody wears the same blue overalls) think and behave, this aspect reinforcing people’s weak position (as individuals) within the country of Oceania:

“The B words were not constructed on any etymological plan. The words of which they could be made up could be any parts of speech, and could be placed in any order and mutilated in any way which made them easy to pronounce while indicating their derivation.” (Orwell 2003,p. 347)

Additionally, the strong (metaphoric or linguistic) analogy that can be made between Newspeak and the citizens of Oceania comes from the regularity that characterizes the Newspeak grammar and the treatment given to people. With very few exceptions, the transformations that take place at the grammatical level are regular, but otherwise most words that were irregular before are now modelled in order to fit to the new rules/ideology (e.g. the plural of man, ox, life became mans, oxes, lifes). Oceania's inhabitants are forced to follow new rules as well, they are refused any trait that would make them stand out, that would outline their individual self, and that would deviate from the configuration/stencil imposed by the Party.

Furthermore, these two characteristics are meant to simplify the language used in Oceania and respectively the speech of the people from this nation, which would therefore have effects of simplification on the process of thinking. Orwell seems to adhere in introducing this idea to the Sapir-Whorf hypothesis (1940), also called the "linguistic relativity principle" according to which language gives shape and structure to human perception (apud Sisk 1997,p. 12); additionally language influences the production of thought, therefore simplified language leads to a smaller, less complex range of thoughts which will eventually shape minds incapable of producing thoughts that would be a menace for the Party's stability. Moreover, as to continue the idea that people are given the same treatment as the language, we may say that people's conditions of living are also cut down/diminished/simplified, since they have access only to products poor in quality and reduced in number. In this regard Orwell again combines the scientific with the metaphorical and symbolical – Sapir-Whorf's theory on language is combined with a metaphorical idea of reduction and with the symbolic putting in charge of Syme with the ever more shortened version of the Newspeak Dictionary – Syme is an well-known (unsuccessful for the patient) amputation technique practised in the late nineteenth century. Therefore, once more, symbolically this time, Orwell renders the idea of the reduction of language with negative, debilitating effects upon the users.

Many times contested at a scientific level, the introduction of an artificial language such as Newspeak as an instrument of shaping the minds of the users does find its validity at an artistic (metaphoric and symbolic) level. Even if newer studies extend the

study of the dichotomy language–thought towards the newer dichotomy of image–thought, there still are plenty of studies to follow the determination of thought by language – the works of brain physiologist Susan Greenfield, confirm the fact that “language doesn’t just enable us to communicate more efficiently and effectively – it gives order in both senses of the word, to thought itself” (2009,p. 164). Besides this, Orwell’s creation will never cease to remain strong at least at a symbolic level. And as long as it cannot be contested as a vehicle for Doublethink, it not only managed to survive in literary history, but was also developed as Doublespeak – a term which is not used by Orwell in the novel, but emerged as a concept standing on its own.

### **3. Doublespeak – or how Newspeak transforms thought**

In the explanation of the B vocabulary in the Appendix, Orwell boldly mentions that the special function of certain Newspeak words “was not so much to express meanings as to destroy them” (Orwell 2003,p.348). This is exactly the form under which the concept of Doublespeak was developed by theorists of language.

Doublespeak, as explained by William Lutz, is a type of language that rejects the essential function of language, which is that of communication, and veers towards the inconsistency between what is transmitted and what it really represents (Lutz, 1989/2015,p. 1-2). Since language, showed by the already mentioned linguist, can be “used not to build but to destroy, not to communicate but to confuse, not to clarify but to obscure, not to lead but mislead” (1989,p. 1), doublespeak is the perfect instrument to do so. The ones who make use of it want to present the truth in a way that it becomes pleasant or tolerable even if it is not, so that bad news can be seen as good, and thus the unacceptable is embellished to look bearable by means of distorting, deceiving, misrepresenting (1989/2015,p. 1-2). Lutz further develops the definition of doublespeak and validates Orwell’s premise according to which the limitation of language leads to the limitation of thought:

“Doublespeak is language that pretends to communicate but really doesn’t. It is language that makes the bad seem good, the negative appear positive, the unpleasant

appear attractive or at least tolerable. Doublespeak is language that avoids or shifts responsibility, language that is at variance with its real or purported meaning. It is language that conceals or prevents thought; rather than extending thought, doublespeak limits it.” (Lutz, 1996,p. 4)

Such a tool can become a weapon in the wrong hands that can employ it to manipulate or control people through language, one of the segments of life using it fervently being the political one. In his essay, *Politics and the English Language*, George Orwell is against the way in which politicians make abusive use of it, transmitting vague information, transforming the concrete in the abstract, leaning toward the imprecise, replacing and concealing some facts and data behind embellished words and, after all, not communicating anything, or, even more directly, lying to one’s face in a manner which is more difficult to contest – lamenting the state mankind (from India to Russian and up to Japan) had reached after WWII because of political decisions, Orwell says that the only manner in which politicians could possibly hope to diminish the effects of their atrocious decisions was by using a language which

*“has to consist largely of euphemism, question-begging and sheer cloudy vagueness. [...] Political language [...] is designed to make lies sound truthful and murder respectable, and to give an appearance of solidity to pure wind.” (Orwell, 2000,p. 136- 139)*

In order to show the complexity of such a language, Orwell invents one himself in his novel *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, where he also explains the way in which it functions and which its uses are. By having invented it he criticizes political speech that has the purpose of manipulating, controlling or taking advantage of citizens, and politicians who do not seek to put themselves in the service of the people but to gain power and authority. One of the most famous slogans created by Orwell as author, and by the Party as a fictional institution, which is both an example of Newspeak and doublespeak, is “WAR IS PEACE” (Orwell, 1949/2003,p, 19-31).

As Edward White (in Lutz, 1989) explains, the fact that Orwell, whom he calls “the patron saint of opposition to doublespeak”, disagrees with the use of this language by

politicians “overstates the need for simple, concrete expression.” However, despite the negative aspects of doublespeak, the same author takes in consideration the flaws of an opposed type of language, which is singlespeak, as he named it and which he considers “a less obvious evil” (White in Lutz, 1989,p. 47-48).

It is certain and easily understood that doublespeak has many features that would classify it as a disgraceful, abusive, perverse, amoral instrument when used against people, but it is harder not to be biased and to approve/sustain the bluntness of singlespeak while exposing the other. Both of them can be deceptive and dangerous if used as manifestations of immoral means of achieving a purpose (id.,p. 49-52). The difference is that whereas doublespeak represents two contradictory ideas that the interlocutor is forced to believe at the same time, singlespeak deals with the simplest meanings, lacking any artistic values, and being what White calls “the simplemindedness and literal-mindedness” (id.,p. 47). Interpreted either way, it is clear that Orwell wanted to urge readers to understand the perils of insincere language and condemn such an abuse in politicians by making an exaggerated, caricatural sketch of this kind of language political speech (see “duckspeak”).

#### **4. Euphemisms – pillar of Doublespeak**

Since doublespeak refers to ways in which meaning is manipulated – changed, made vague/ambiguous – in order to meet the purposes of the senders, one of the means of doing so is represented by euphemisms. This statement is based on Ralph Keyes’ affirmation that the use of euphemisms “softens the harsh, smoothes the rough, makes what’s negative sound positive” (Keyes, 2010,p. 6).

Although based on the principle of synonymy, euphemisms do not only carry the meaning that is meant to be transmitted, but they also add some state of vagueness or nuance to it, transforming a straight line into a somehow curved one (2010,p. 8) so as to protect the receivers or, more perversely to deceive them. Moreover, they can also “inflate and magnify, making the euphemized items seem altogether grander and more important”, these ones belonging to the category of positive euphemisms, or “deflate

and diminish”, these being the negative euphemisms, the ones that, with their defensive function, eradicate from the language the aspects that are unpleasant for the interlocutors (Rawson, 1981,p. 1).

Kate Burridge (2012) identifies six types of euphemisms and associated functions : the protective euphemism (to shield and avoid offence), the underhand euphemism (to mystify and to misrepresent), the uplifting euphemisms (to talk up and to inflate), the provocative euphemisms (to reveal and to inspire), the cohesive euphemism (to show solidarity and help define the gang), the ludic euphemisms (to have fun and to entertain). Burridge associates Orwell's name with the second secondary and observes how the trend set by him later led to the medical, the military and the political jargon add, through their use of euphemistic vocabulary, “additional dimensions of guile and secrecy to the disguise.” (2012,p. 68)

On the account that euphemisms can be misunderstood for slang, jargon or double entendre, Keyes chose to define this concept broadly, as he affirms, saying that they are “words or phrases substituted for ones that make us uneasy.” The same American author finds thus euphemisms as being useful, being an instrument that people can use to express a certain meaning without having to deal with the embarrassment or other negative aspects that the employment of a different word would bring along (Keyes, 2010,p. 7-8). Concealing or sugar-coating some aspects may be useful in some professions or branches of life in some situations that would otherwise seem unprofessional or bluntly too cruel: a doctor might have to break down a diagnosis more gently at least at the beginning until the patient comes to accept the condition, a teacher has to praise answers from students even sometimes there are quite a number of aspects to quickly object to or laugh at, a psychologist cannot label too abruptly a patient and communicate the findings too openly in the initial stage(s) of the collaboration with a patient/client, commercials cannot state too brusquely some medical conditions that one or another medicine is supposed to heal or appease, military officials conceal the cruelty of attacks and life losses behind euphemisms, and so on. Hugh Rawson also identifies the utility of euphemisms in many aspects related to the everyday life, their use being more than welcome when people have to talk about their fears, mundane/trivial activities, or personal/intimate issues (Rawson, 1981,p. 1).

However, these tools can also reach the opposite end and they might be transformed in an advantage for the people who are interested in pretending not to know and posing in order to mislead their interlocutors. Therefore, when it comes to indelicate subjects, the speakers making use of euphemisms seem inevitably innocent, appear as not knowing “the words being euphemized, let alone what they mean” (Keyes, 2010,p. 6). Their “essentially duplicitous nature”, explains Rawson, is the feature of euphemisms that attract people and institutions that seek to hide or lie about their (wrong)doings and intentions, and that employ these tools consciously, knowing entirely what they are doing (Rawson, 1981,p. 1). In Nineteen Eighty-Four, for example, euphemisms seem to be the perfect instrument for the Party since they help the politicians from Oceania pose as benefactors when, in reality, they are only interested in power, manipulation, and authority.

In the preface to his newer study on doublespeak, William Lutz (1996, X) implies that the language used by some institutions nowadays shares some serious features with the language invented in Orwell’s dystopian work. He describes and puts together, for example, the language employed by the Supreme Court with the one of Nineteen Eighty-Four, calling it “false, deceptive, misleading, and contradictory”, just like the language of economics which he further analyses (many times synonymous with “utter nonsense that passes itself off as wisdom”) and the language of politics (under the permanent threat or direct manifestation of the “corruption of doublespeak”).

As language is in a constant state of change, the same process occurs with euphemisms, especially when they are related to the public discourse, says Keyes, which consists heavily of euphemisms. This is the reason for which he considers that, if employed exaggeratedly in the public arena, their effect could be nefarious. Although in the past euphemisms were used “to avoid blasphemy and to be polite”, they later became utensils of the commercial and political departments, and sometimes even weapons (Keyes, 2010,p. 10-12). This is why the author affirms that the worst aspect of euphemisms is when they “are employed by politicians, bureaucrats, merchants, and others as tools of manipulation” (2010,p. 229).

As for Newspeak, this language consists of words belonging to three different classes, which are called by its creator the A vocabulary, the B vocabulary, and the C vocabulary. The first category is made of words necessary for activities that take place on a daily basis, that are meant to express things related to the everyday life. The second group is formed of political terms and words used for political purpose, among which one can find a great number of euphemisms. The third and last class includes the terminology that is essential to workers from the scientific and technologic departments.

Since the scope of this language is to display the social reality of Oceania, one of the linguistic devices through which Orwell does that is through the employment of euphemisms. They have a double function of covering and cancelling/abolishing altogether other words deemed undesirable in the ideology of the Party: when discussing words such as “honour”, “justice”, morality”, internationalism”, “democracy”, science” or “religion” the authors says “A few blanket words covered them and, in covering them, abolished them.” (Orwell 2003,p. 348–349) At the level of the story, euphemisms represent a tool used by the almighty Party by means of which the politicians seek to insert new images in the minds of the Ingsoc’s devotees, or to shape the already existing ones in order to fit their aims and desires. For example, euphemizing the “forced-labour camp” into “joycamp” shows the manipulative intentions that lie at the very foundation of Newspeak, i.e. the fact that politicians intend to make people associate their labour days with a state of pleasure and happiness so that it would be easier to convince them into working (exhaustively). (For further discussion on euphemisms and other levels of discourse in the novel see Suciú & Culea 2018)

Nevertheless, the effects of this device go even deeper, influencing the relations between people, the way in which they interact and see each other as well. Not only do people seem to be insignificant for those who embody the power and authority in Oceania, for they are being replaced as quickly as possible when one’s services are no longer required, but they also become unimportant for their peers the moment they no longer exist. The euphemism “unperson”, which refers to a person that was executed and whose identity was erased, shows, by the nature of its linguistic formation, the kind of position/stand that politicians want from the citizens: to lack interest for a dead person as if they had never existed.

Moreover, changes at the level of the language through euphemisms take place in relation with the process of thinking as well. For the citizens of Oceania, any thought that does not concord with one of the principles of Ingsoc is a “heretical thought”, while any word that carries the minimal allusion to a state of intellectual or political freedom is a “heretical word”.

Nonetheless, two of the most artistically laden euphemisms concocted by Orwell in his dystopian novel, as they stand not for one meaning only, but for a series of meanings, are “crimethink” and “oldthink”. Whereas “crimethink” refers to “all words grouping themselves round the concepts of liberty and equality”, “oldthink” implies “all words grouping themselves round the concepts of objectivity and rationalism” (Orwell, 2003,p. 349). The narrator explaining the word formation process of euphemisms in the Appendix is perfectly aware of the function of ambiguity of these words and observes how this is used as a weapon – “Greater precision would have been dangerous” (id.).

Other important euphemisms, directly recognized as such by the metadiscursive voice are: “Minipax” (rendering the exact opposite), “prolefeed” (the materials “fed” to the proles according to the wish of the party). “Goodsex” and “sexcrime”, two terms that, according to the principles of Ingsoc, carry opposite meanings, represent what is allowed and what is forbidden. If “goodsex” refers only to the intercourse between husband and wife for “the sole purpose of begetting children”, “sexcrime” has a wider range of influence, standing for all sexual acts that deviate from “goodsex”. The writer of the Appendix explains how such telescoped or portmanteau words have the purpose of narrowing the meaning and therefore reduce the number of associations that could be made when a syntagm such as “Communist International” was used. According to him the “composite picture” that such a syntagm may trigger in the minds of the receiver is annulled by the welding of the words under the heading “Comintern”. Equally, associations behind “Minitrue” were “fewer and more controllable” (Orwell 2003,p. 351)

As it can be observed from the previous examples, the words of Newspeak are either compound words, or abbreviated constructions or both at the same time, consisting of “two or more words, or portions of words, welded together in an easily pronounceable

form". At the basis of these constructions there lies a conscious purpose as it is believed that abbreviating a word/name means narrowing or altering its meaning. An abbreviated form would thus retain less of the prior meaning, and would represent less for the speakers of a language based almost entirely on such principles of existence. And even if some linguists doubt such strong determination between Newspeak and people's mind, there are studies which have demonstrated how some forms of language "fed" to (clueless) masses can affect memory and perception (see Burrige 2012,p. 68 to certify the last idea).

### Conclusions

Changes in language have been studied from numerous perspectives as they give rise to or reflect interesting changes in society. Although, generally speaking, language is transformed unintentionally by its speakers, who make use of it in an almost automatic manner, ignoring its rules and the main meanings of words, thus, enriching them with new connotations and even shaping new words, in the case of Orwell's language we can see that the speakers of Newspeak have no power over language. On the contrary, language has the power over them. Even if, language should be neither good nor bad, Orwell warned his readers, through his work(s), that language can become an instrument of great power, whose functions can deviate from its main functions when used by ill-intentioned minds.

One can easily observe the foreknowledge that George Orwell possessed in many aspects that he introduced in Nineteen Eighty-Four. With slight variations or alterations, his society, his totalitarian regime and especially his language found a form of manifestation on one of the two sides of the Atlantic. His telescoped nation (Oceania) and his telescoped view ahead of his time issued the type of warning that (the excessively politicized) human society needed after WWII and, sadly enough, which will be needed (according even to the prediction at the end of the Appendix) in 2050.

**Disclosure statement**

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

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