



# **Culturas, Identidades e Litero-Línguas Estrangeiras**

Atas do I Colóquio Internacional  
de Línguas Estrangeiras



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## George Orwell's "Politics and the English Language". Euphemisms and metaphors in wartime Britain

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### Abstract

Language and politics are two inextricable concepts for George Orwell, who, writing during and after the 2nd World War context in Britain, criticised the vagueness, the excessive use of phraseology and the powerful influence of metaphors in political language. According to the author: "In our own time, political speech and writing are largely the defence of the indefensible (...). Thus political language has to consist largely of euphemism, question-begging and sheer cloudy vagueness." (Orwell, 2000, p. 356). In a decaying time when the general political atmosphere was therefore negative, the language was also unscrupulous as it suffered from the schizophrenia, vagueness, metaphorical style and lies that defined politics in post-war Britain (Orwell, 2000, pp. 348-9). An opponent of inkhorn terms, Orwell loathed the use of the hundreds of foreign words and phrases current in English and believed that the English language, or as he highlights, "Saxon words", would cover the needs of political writers instead of Latin or Greek or/and other loans. In this article, we intend to analyse Orwell's 1946 essay "Politics and the English language", focusing on the English political context of that period, as well as to scrutinise Orwell's idea of language concreteness by delving into metaphorical phraseology and the inkhorn controversy. We will also emphasize Orwell's contemporary relevance.

**Keywords:** phraseology, metaphors, English language, politics.

### 1. Introduction

George Orwell, a pseudonym of Eric Blair, was born in 1903 and died in 1950, having therefore witnessed the bloodiest events in Europe and in the world in the first half of the twentieth century, namely the two World Wars and the Spanish civil war. These events would definitely shape his character not only as a writer but also as a person. As a result, he became one of the most influential writers describing the 1930s and 1940s, of such importance to understand the twentieth century, even though he was not the most prolific of writers (Ingle, 1993, p. viii). Ironically, his other works would only be studied after the publication of *Animal Farm* (1945) and *Nineteen Eighty Four* (1949). The former brought him fame and the latter would ultimately consolidate his success, though only posthumously. Widely read around the world, more than 50,000 copies of *Nineteen Eighty Four* were sold in America in 1984 (Ingle, 1993, p. viii). This shows the scope and relevance of the work a few decades after it had been published.

Nonetheless, nowadays Orwell is again on the roll as he has been much referred to by the world press and opinion makers regarding US President's populism. As Donald Trump is constantly turning fire on the media, he is undeniably threatening, and thus severely putting at stake, individual freedom and freedom of the press so much

acclaimed by the US Constitution. The Orwellian ideas of doublethink, doublespeak and alternative truths or facts, as depicted in *Nineteen Eighty Four*, are now being recovered and are under the press spotlight (Hern, 2017; Swayn, 2017).

*Animal Farm* and *Nineteen Eighty Four* were written under the auspices of the Second World War and they represent two severe attacks and criticisms on totalitarianism, fascism and communism. The most popular Orwellian phrase, ‘Big Brother is watching you’ has become part not only of the English language but of numerous languages. Peculiarly, this phrase is now more than ever tremendously contemporary as our individuality is thoroughly scrutinised. New words and phrases such as CCTV cameras, terrorism, Islam, Taliban, Isis, just to name a few, became part of our everyday lexicon.

Even nearly 70 years after the publication of *Nineteen Eighty Four*, the phrase still echoes in democratic countries as a warning against the dangers of totalitarian political regimes and of the schizophrenia associated with the total control of one’s individual freedom. In addition, because the idea of fear about terrorism has been widely instilled in people’s minds, scapegoating is conducted by right-wing populists against, mainly, every Muslim who, most of the times, are not to blame. This metonymical style makes the language of current times rather inceptive and thus extremely powerful as Islamophobia has been much endorsed by the western world.

Acclaimed a writer who denounced and understood the real essence of the Soviet world, Orwell became crucial reading. Still, his literary legacy extends far beyond the two renowned abovementioned works. Besides revealing himself a cunning novelist, we must also mention the importance of his essays, war commentaries broadcast at the BBC, literary and film reviews, so revealing of the author’s life and true personality. Timothy Garton Ash (1998) underlined this much specific intertwining liaison as one of the reasons for his success as a writer. To the question “Why Orwell?”, and not other better writers, Garton Ash pointed out the close relationship between life and his works, as he argued the following:

The pure literary merit of any individual piece becomes secondary as you navigate the intimate infolding of life and work. You discover multiple connections: between the books Orwell reviewed and those he wrote, between his own love life and those of his characters (...). (parag. 5)

As an essayist, Orwell wrote acute and pungent essays regarding the economic and social crisis that England was living in the 1930s and 1940s. From politics to children literature, leisure or other daily aspects of life, Orwell managed, in his essays, to capture the essence of popular culture of his own time, reaching thus a wider audience that would also identify with the writer. Robert Pearce (1997) gave him the epithet of an “elastic brow” being “surely one of the most remarkably broad-sighted and acute historical witnesses of our time and our world in the first half of the twentieth century” (p. 4). To Jeffrey Meyers (2000, p. 266), Orwell had the ability to transform the essay, which normally lacks the glamour and grandeur of a novel, into something deep, serious and vivacious.

*Animal Farm* and *Nineteen Eighty Four*, two of Orwell’s most acclaimed works, will

not represent the crux of this article, despite their implicit importance, but we will focus primarily on one of Orwell's political essays: "Politics and the English Language" first published in April 1946 in the London literary magazine *Horizon*. We will analyse Orwell's essay from linguistic and cultural viewpoints, focusing on the English political status quo of the period Orwell lived in, as well as highlight Orwell's solutions to the problem of language vagueness and slovenliness, in an attempt to get rid of metaphors and ambiguity in the political language of his own time.

## 2. The political context: the role of writers in the war period

A left-wing man, as he was a confessed socialist, Orwell believed that, in a political period as they were living during the war, even (or especially) writers could not become alien and indifferent to the dangers of totalitarianism and therefore needed to take a stand with their major weapon: writing.

Orwell's true nature was to become a writer, as he confessed in "Why I Write" "From a very early age, perhaps the age of five or six, I knew when I grew up I should be a writer" (Orwell, 2000, p. 1). Indeed a critical writer and with a profound sense of aestheticism, Orwell always devoted himself to writing good prose free of venalities and with a political purpose claiming that "no book is genuinely free from political bias" (p. 4). In a very turbulent warfare period, Orwell could not have only written ornate or merely descriptive books. Quite on the contrary, his political loyalties forced him "into becoming a sort of pamphleteer", as he specified in "Why I Write" (Orwell, 2000, p. 4) in 1946.

Looking back to what he had then already written, Orwell (2000) stated in that same essay that:

Good prose is like a window pane. (...) looking back through my work, I see that it is invariably where I lacked a political purpose that I wrote lifeless books and was betrayed into purple passages, sentences without meaning, decorative adjectives and humbug generally. (p. 7)

The writers could not keep out of politics in a period in which language was at the service of propagandistic demands to meet totalitarian goals, being hence deceitful, as Orwell (2000) confirmed:

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 a cuttlefish squirting out ink. (p. 357)

The main *leitmotiv* of Orwell's writings was, in fact, to transform political writing into an art (Orwell, 2000, p. 5), however always telling the truth without violating his literary instincts. For that purpose, language clarity was the key to exposing lies in a period of downright propaganda.

## 3. Metaphorical phraseology and ambiguity in political rhetoric

A political text reflects an intimate and unavoidable link between language

and ideology. According to Adrian Beard (2000), it is how language, a means of communication, is used that we are able to understand “how the ideas have been shaped” (p. 18). Thus “language reflects the ideological position of those who have created it” (p. 18). Rhetorical devices such as metaphors and metonyms are frequently used in the language of politics. Beard (2000) upheld the idea that “a metaphor is deeply embedded in the way we construct the world around us and the way that world is constructed for us by others” (p. 21).

Carmine Gallo (2016) also stressed the power of metaphors in political life throughout history. Not only are they very fierce and influential tools in the propagandistic political language, but they are also the strongest allies of political campaigns, ultimately setting the terms to victory. In *Ted Talks*, James Geary (2009), emphasizes the idea that “metaphors trigger analogies and open the door to discoveries”, unveiling a quite defined path backed up by the metaphor itself. To Geary:

[A] Metaphor lives a secret life all around us. We utter about six metaphors in political language. Metaphorical thinking is essential to how we understand ourselves and others, how we communicate, learn, discover and invent. But metaphor is a way of thought before it is a way with words. (min. 0:11)

Similarly, Orwell was pretty aware of the ubiquity of metaphors in political language. The famous Party slogans in *Nineteen Eighty Four* “War is Peace, Freedom is slavery, Ignorance is Strength” (Orwell, 2009, p. 6) utterly exemplify the pervasiveness of a metaphor.

According to Orwell’s definition, “all issues are political issues and politics was a mass of lies, evasions, folly, hatred and schizophrenia” (p. 357); therefore, language, if being at the service of propagandistic demands, must suffer and turn itself into very bad condition: “When the general atmosphere is bad, language must suffer” (p. 357). According to Edmund Fawcett (2014), “Orwell dwelt on the use and abuse of words in politics” (p. 333) and, in the essay “Politics and the English Language”, “Orwell expressed perhaps his single strongest conviction (...) that bad speech could lead to political folly, violence and oppression” (p. 333). Nonetheless, “Politics and the English Language” represents an attempt to shed some light on the falsities of political messages covered up by figures of speech, such as metaphors, euphemisms and specific phrases.

In “Politics and the English Language”, Orwell shows evidence of the decline of the English language as a result of the decadence of dictatorial regimes and inappropriate usage by tradition and imitation. Corrupted language was therefore the result of mainly political and economic wrongdoings. According to Orwell, the prose of his time was not concrete and was filled with meaningless words often used in a “consciously dishonest way”, for example words such as *democracy*, *freedom*, *patriotic*, *justice*, *equality*, just to name a few (p. 353).

Orwell’s belief was that the abusive and inappropriate use of metaphorical phraseology turned the language into something imprecise and rendered to a staleness of imagery as it was easier to use worn-out metaphors than inventing new



phrases. Orwell called them “dying metaphors” being “twisted out of their original meaning without those who use them even being aware of the fact.” (p. 351), e.g. *toe the line*, *ride roughshod over*, *stand shoulder to shoulder with*, *play into the hands of*, *no axe to grind*, *fishing in troubled waters*, *on the order of the day*, *Achilles’ heel* (p. 351). Orwell added another example just to make his point clear, *the hammer and the anvil*, stating that the expression was wrongly used as it implies that the anvil suffers the most harm and not the other way round as it happens in real life (p. 351).

Another common and decayed technique was the use of operators or verbal false limbs, consisting mainly on the elimination of simple verbs such as *break*, *stop*, *spoil* or *mend*. It was very common in political speech for a verb to become a part of a phrase: *render inoperative*, *militate against*, *prove unacceptable*, *exhibit a tendency*, *serve the purpose of*, for example. Simple conjunctions and prepositions were also replaced by phrases such as: *with respect to*, *having regard to*, *the fact that*, *in the interest of*, *by dint of*, *on the hypothesis that* (p. 351). The passive voice replaced the active voice and noun constructions were used instead of gerunds.

Words like *exhibit*, *exploit*, *virtual*, *promote*, *constitute*, *utilize*, *eliminate*, *liquidate* replaced simpler ones and “try to bring scientific impartiality to biased judgments” (Orwell, 2000, p. 352). This is what Orwell named pretentious diction, resulting in language slovenliness and vagueness.

Orwell illustrated these language “tricks by means of which the work of prose is habitually dodged” (p. 352) with five passages, of which we reproduce two here, the first stated by Professor Lancelot Hogben and the second reproduced in a Communist pamphlet:

2. Above all, we cannot play ducks and drakes with a native battery of idioms which prescribes such egregious collocations of vocables as the Basic *put up with* for *tolerate* or *put at a loss* for *bewilder*. (...)
4. All the ‘best people’ from the gentlemen’s clubs, and all the frantic Fascist captains, united in common hatred of Socialism and bestial horror of the rising tide of mass revolutionary movement, have turned to acts of provocation, to found incendiarism, to medieval legends of poisoned wells, to legalize their own destruction to chauvinist fervor on behalf of the fight against the revolutionary way out of the crisis. (pp. 349-350)

These are just two good examples of the mental vices language was suffering then. Orwell was very critical about the lack of precision these examples display. Orwell (2000, p. 355) advised Professor Hogben to find the meaning of ‘egregious’ in a dictionary. As Professor Hogben disapproved the usage of everyday phrases, such as *put up with* or *put at a loss*, egregious was not probably the best adjective to define them.

Concerning the other example, Orwell criticised the “accumulation of stale phrases” that “choke” the writer of the pamphlet “like tea-leaves blocking a sink” (p. 355).

#### 4. The Inkhorn controversy: standard English versus loan words

The inkhorn controversy dates back to the sixteenth century, a period of considerable scientific, cultural, social and political changes. Consequently, language would also become permeable to inevitable transformations. During the sixteenth century and early seventeenth, this dispute over language expansion and inkhornism (Crystal, 2003, p. 61) was much debated by the language purists and the defenders of the use of loan words. The latter believed that the words of the vernacular language, i.e. English, did not conform to the scientific discoveries or were not adequate when translating classical works. Therefore, Latin and Greek words and other loan words were added. In fact, throughout the sixteenth century, the English language became widely accepted and suffered many changes at all levels. During the Renaissance, many new foreign borrowings entered the language. In opposition, the language purists believed the texts should be written in English so that the new learning could be “brought within the reach of the English public” (Crystal, 2003, p. 60). Consequently, Latin was gradually losing its status as the language of scholarship, as David Crystal (2003) so well put it:

The controversy over which kind of English lexicon to use should not be allowed to obscure the fact that English was now widely accepted as the language of learning. At the beginning of the 16<sup>th</sup> century, the situation had been very different, with Latin still established as the normal language of scholarship. All over Europe, vernaculars were criticized as crude, limited, and immature. (p. 61)

Sounding much like 16<sup>th</sup> century scholars defending the use of Saxon words and opposing all the inkhorn terms that entered the language during the scientific revolution of the period, Orwell (2000) also stood against the use of borrowed adjectives, such as: *epoch-making*, *historic*, *epic*, *triumphant*, *inexorable*, *veritable*, “used to dignify the sordid process of international politics” (p. 352) and other archaic words, for example: *realm*, *throne*, *chariot*, *glorify war*, *sword*, *shield*, *jackboot*, *clarion*, *trident* (p. 352).

Orwell despised the fact that Latin, Greek and other foreign words were used to give just an air of culture and elegance. He highlighted these words as examples: *cul de sac*, *ancien régime*, *deus ex machina*, *mutatis mutandis*, *status quo*, *Gleichschaltung* (p. 352). Orwell (2000) explained the reason in the following statements:

Except for the useful abbreviations, i.e., e.g. and etc., there is no real need for any of the hundreds of foreign phrases now current in English. Bad writers, and especially scientific, political and sociological writers, are nearly always haunted by the notion that Latin or Greek words are grander than Saxon ones, and unnecessary words like expedite, ameliorate, predict, extraneous, deracinated, clandestine, sub-aqueous and hundreds of others constantly gain ground from their Anglo-Saxon opposite numbers. (p. 352)

Orwell (2000) parodied this language vagueness by translating what he considered a passage of good English into the modern English of the worst sort. The verse from *Ecclesiastics* stated the following:

I returned, and saw under the sun, that the race is not to the swift, nor the battle to the strong, neither yet bread to the wise, nor yet riches to men of understanding, nor yet favour to men of skill; but time and chance happeneth to them all. (p. 353)

And the version in modern English would be something like this:

Objective consideration of contemporary phenomena compels the conclusion that success or failure in competitive activities exhibits no tendency to be commensurate with innate capacity, but that a considerable element of the unpredictable must invariably be taken into account. (p. 353)

Used mainly to deceive people, political language is liable to a lifeless, imitative style at the service of a vicious orthodoxy. The mechanic repetition of such phrases turns human beings into some sort of dummies and machine-like individuals. The archetypal example of this language is brilliantly represented in *Newspeak*, the propagandistic euphemistic language promoted by the dictatorial regime of Oceania in *Nineteen Eighty Four*. “Doublethink”, “Big Brother is watching you” or “two plus two equals five” are recurrent phrases designed to curb freedom of speech and thought. Therefore, Orwell sets forth the idea of truth manipulation in wartime by exploring the meaning of the words democracy and fascism. That is, Orwell wanted to expose the idea that, in totalitarian states, the (wrong) idea of democracy could be indoctrinated and he believed that if the dictators imposed their own idea of democracy this would lead people to believe that they were actually in the best of political systems. Brainwashing, keeping people in ignorance were somehow two effective methods for the spread of their own version of the truth. That was why the Ministry of Truth in *Nineteen Eighty Four* was so important.

According to Orwell, in post-war period, political speech and writing were largely “the defence of the indefensible”. Consequently, “political language has to consist mainly of euphemism, question-begging and sheer cloudy vagueness.” (p. 356). The author presented some examples of this type of language: *pacification* – what really means is defenceless villagers are bombarded from air; *transfer of population* or *rectification of frontiers* means elimination of unreliable elements. Nowadays, politicians and world leaders call it collateral damage, as Adrian Beard (2000) so well explained, reporting to the 1990s:

The shadow boxing of party politics, with its metaphor of battle, becomes less gung-ho when real victims in real wars are to be explained away. In the 1990s dead civilians became ‘collateral damage’ in a form of political language which wanted to hide the horror, while mass education (and often murder) of civilians belonging to the other side became ‘ethnic cleaning’. (p. 22)

The mixture of vagueness, slovenliness and lack of precision which shows sheer incompetence is, according to Orwell, the most marked characteristic of modern English prose and of any kind of political writing (p. 350). Nonetheless, Orwell believed the process of transforming the slovenliness and bad habits of the English language into something clear, perceptible and uncorrupt was reversible.

Despite being sloppy and corrupt, language could be cured from its main illnesses. Orwell (2000) defended the use of standard English and set some rules which represent the antidote to the poisonous threats to language, namely:

- i) Never use a metaphor, simile or other figure of speech which you are used to seeing in print.
- ii) Never use a long word where a short one will do.
- iii) If it is possible to cut a word out, always cut it out.
- iv) Never use the passive where you can use the active.
- v) Never use a foreign phrase, a scientific word or a jargon word if you can think of an everyday English equivalent.
- vi) Break any of these rules sooner than say anything outright barbarous. (p. 359)

## 5. Conclusion

Orwell strongly defended that decayed metaphors, idioms, euphemism, and other vague language, “verbal refuse”, as the author ultimately abridged it, should be sent to the litter bin where they belong. The essay “Politics and the English Language”, even though written down in 1946, still bears some resemblance to our current political situation and remains fairly current. The rules that Orwell gives us should also be applied in our written language, political or not, and the use of euphemisms and metaphors is abundant in a world where the different cultures are becoming more and more suspicious of one another as terrorism is creating a whole new language. Metaphors are still uttered as an effective language weapon to persuade millions of people to adhere to defensive and therefore ruthless political discourses. The discourse of national populisms supported by biased ideologies is channelled into people as they fear individual difference, ultimately thinning out in the conformity of the multitudes, a danger that John Stuart Mill (1997) in the 19<sup>th</sup> century also alluded to and warned against.

Orwellism is more than ever a much resounding language brand, as the expressions the author coined mainly in *Nineteen Eighty Four* or *Animal Farm* bear a strong resemblance to our current society being at the forefront of debate worldwide.

Cristopher Hitchens (2002) highlighted first and foremost Orwell’s pledge to individual freedom and language as a promoter of truth:

Orwell’s ‘views’ have been largely vindicated by Time, so he need not seek any pardon on that score. But what he illustrates, by his commitment to language as the partner of truth, is that ‘views’ do not really count; that it matters not what you think, but how you think; and that politics are relatively unimportant, while principles have a way of enduring, as do the few irreducible individuals who maintain allegiance to them. (p. 150)

To conclude, Orwell’s victory, appropriating Hitchens’s expression (2002), was the triumph of individual freedom, decency, straightforwardness, linguistic simplicity and clarity over falsity and language manipulation.

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