



Donald Wingert

IN SPRING, 1984, The Learning Community sponsored a symposium, "Reflections on *Nineteen Eighty-Four*," which featured lectures and discussions focusing on themes and issues in George Orwell's *1984*. The symposium was funded by the Student Projects Committee of the CSUN Foundation. As part of the symposium, CSUN students were invited to enter an essay contest in which themes or issues suggested by *1984* were to be investigated. The winning essay, *Why Hasn't Newspeak Caught On?*, was written by John Mandelberg, who received a cash prize of \$100, presented to him on April 9th, 1984, at the University Art Gallery Opening.

Why Hasn't Newspeak Caught On?

John Mandelberg

CO BESOSO PASOJE PTOROS
CO ES ON HAMA PASOJE BOAÑ.

Stefan George, "Urspruenge"
("Origins")

A! Elbereth Gilthoniel!
silivren penna míriel
o menel aglar elenath,
Gilthoniel, A! Elbereth!

J.R.R. Tolkien, *The Return of
The King*

Oldthinkers unbellyfeel Ingsoc.
George Orwell, 1984

Like the German mystical poet Stefan George and the renowned author of posthumous best-sellers J.R.R. Tolkien, George Orwell created a language; and in eight months or so, the fictional context of his language will lie, like theirs, in the past. Stefan George used his childhood secret language in his German poems to express something (we don't know exactly what); he did not, so far as I know, write a grammar or dictionary for it. Tolkien and Orwell, however, both included a detailed appendix to explain their languages and to give numerous examples of words and phrases. Orwell did not provide a separate runic alphabet for dwarves; but he did seem to attach great importance to Newspeak.

Some iconoclasts have suggested that Tolkien wrote his tales mostly as an excuse to talk about his languages. This outrageous slur might be better applied to Orwell. It is easy to feel that of all the evil, brutal tendencies in the contemporary world that stirred him to the angry despair of 1984, only authoritarian lies and truth-twisting angered him more than what he considered to be the debasing of the English language; to which, he believed, the lying was intimately related. He created Newspeak as a satirical attack upon the debasing of language.

In 1984, Newspeak's purpose is to restrict the range of thought and to make dissenting thought impossible. It would accomplish this by decreasing the vocabulary, narrowing the range of words, destroying distinctions between parts of speech, creating euphemisms for political indoctrination, and regularizing word length and stress, so as to encourage "a gabbling style of speech, at once staccato and monotonous." These were the trends that Orwell thought he saw in the English language of his own day. In the appendix to 1984, he writes:

Even in the early decades of the twentieth century, telescoped words and phrases had been one of the characteristic features of political language; and it had been noticed that the tendency to use abbreviations of this kind was most marked in totalitarian countries and totalitarian organizations. Examples were such words as *Nazi*, *Gestapo*, *Comintern*, *Inprecorr*, *Agitprop*.

In his earlier essay, "Politics and the English Language," Orwell not only ridicules hackneyed metaphors, Latinate pretension, borrowings from foreign languages, and mindless political posturing, but even attacks the use of the "de-" and "-ize" formations and of the passive voice. He urges the reader to "let the meaning choose the word, and not the other way about," and eventually admits the course of his thinking:

Probably it is better to put off using words as long as possible and get one's meaning as clear as one can through pictures or sensations.

What else didn't Orwell like? From 1984:

"Smith!" yelled a voice from the telescreen.
"6079 Smith W! Hands out of pockets in the cells!"

times 17.3.84 bb speech malreported africa rectify
times 19.12.83 forecasts 3 YP 4th quarter 83
misprints verify current issue

"It was only an 'opeless fancy,
It passed like an Ipril dye,
But a look an' a word an' the dreams they stirred
They 'ave stolen my 'eart awey!"

The use of identifying numbers; numerical dates; abbreviations of phrases; "telegraph"-style word constructions without formal sentence structure; naive verse; and dialect. All of these things were part of the debasing of language, for which Newspeak was the warning projection. But come on! Are these things really all that bad? Were they that bad even in 1948?

How does Orwell differ from all of these snooty mid-brow ex-anchormen who write books sneering at people who begin their sentences with "Hopefully?" Orwell links the debasing of language with political degradation and authoritarianism. But is such a link justified? Certainly politicians seem to bend their words when they bend the truth, commercial advertising gives witless obnoxiousness a grotesque power of penetration, and dictatorships throughout the world seem to twist their languages into terrible deformities. But this is hardly the fault of prefixes and hackneyed metaphors. Would Orwell's phrase "times 17.3.84 bb speech malreported africa rectify" be any nicer if it read, "In The Times report of March 17, 1984 AD, Big Brother's speech on Africa was improperly transcribed; please rectify this error"? On the other hand, is everyone who wrote 3-17-84 for that date in this very month guilty of some sort of offense against language? I would think not.

Are we further degraded when we have to take a number while waiting in line at the bakery? And, in what to me is a key point, why does the "prole" woman singing the song quoted above sing in dialect? Winston Smith also

probably pronounced many words differently than they are spelled; but *he* did not speak in dialect. Orwell wants to say that the "prole" woman is different from the rest of us; that her pronunciation is *wrong*.

Orwell was, in short, a grouch about contemporary changes in language: a very insightful grouch, even a brilliant grouch, but a grouch nonetheless.

What has actually happened to language up to 1984? The political realm offers many examples of "doublethink," a word which has itself become a useful part of the English language. But examples of Newspeak, which would have to involve the creation of new words that restrict thought, are less plentiful. The most well known one is probably "Vietnamization." But "Vietnamization" has acquired a certain descriptive meaning that goes beyond its intentions; it refers to a historical event, and we now have a *word* for what happened, rich in ironic connotations. When looking at the vast range of politically-molded language throughout history, the few examples of deliberate word-malformation are almost insignificant. Orwell uses the Declaration of Independence as an example of something that could not be translated into Newspeak; but the Declaration too was a political document, full of manipulative language. Have we forgotten this clause?

He has excited domestic insurrections amongst us, and has endeavored to bring on the inhabitants of our frontiers, the merciless Indian Savages, whose known rule of warfare is an indistinguished destruction of all ages, sexes and conditions.

Surely political manipulation of languages far antedates the Byzantine historian Anna Comnena, who, writing in the 1140's in her *Alexiad*, spoke thus of Pope Gregory VII:

To begin with, (the Pope) outraged (the envoys of Henry IV of Germany) savagely, then cut their hair and beards, the one with scissors, the other with a razor, and finally he did something else to them which was quite improper, going beyond the insolent behavior one expects from barbarians, and then sent them away. I would have given a name to the outrage, but as a woman and a princess modesty forbade me. What was done on his orders was not only unworthy of a

high priest, but of any man who bears the name of Christian. Even the barbarian's intention, let alone the act itself, filled me with disgust; if I had described it in detail, reedpen and paper would have been defiled.

The fact that politically-manipulated English is now more easily spread around by television and the technology-aided press hardly means that it has supplanted other forms of expression or that people's minds are more corrupted by it than in the past. I recently recorded on cassette tape the extraordinary audio spectacle of a crowd of campaign supporters for a presidential candidate chanting a slogan from a Wendy's hamburger ad. A phrase had been invented, it had acquired new and vibrant meaning, it was being used with relish; the process was silly, and perhaps degrading, but no more so than it has always been.

Some would feel that Orwell's warnings are more pertinent in the area of word-formation and misuse, not necessarily political. Almost every literate person has some complaint about the way other people use words. I particularly dislike the use of "tragic" by the local TV news people to mean "fatal." But most of this griping is merely fussy priggishness by those who feel threatened by the creative use of words. One self-righteous newspaper columnist after another has denounced a sentence like "Hopefully, it won't rain tomorrow" as nonsense. But the speaker of this sentence knows very well what is being expressed; and this is the best way of expressing it. "Hopefully" has a meaning and a function in expression that cannot presently be replaced by any other word. Many of those abbreviations that Orwell despised have become useful words. Why should anyone say "video cassette recorder" when it is easier to say "VCR," when "VCR" has a pleasant feel on the tongue, and when people know what it means?

Oh, there is grumbling about "prioritize" and "time-frame" and the whole bureaucratic style of pompous jargon, but is this really a threat to our minds? Do these words restrict our range of thought? Perhaps the more serious threat to English comes not from new words introduced from jargon, but from the stifling of vocabulary in ordinary

speech. Anyone who has ridden on a bus with high school students recently could believe that the commonly-held vocabulary has shrunk alarmingly, and that filler words like "really" and "I dunno" have expanded like sponges to fill the holes in expression. But this shrinkage, if it is indeed occurring, is not accompanied by what Orwell feared: a narrowing of range. On the contrary, simple words seem to acquire more and more overlays of meaning, so that "get" and "cool" and "real" seem to float in a fluffy cloud of their own possibilities. This may seem to cause a monotony in expression, but, on the other hand, the density of words helps to create a laconic richness in our ordinary speech.

Furthermore, as an antidote to vocabulary shrinkage, we have the energy of slang, as brand-new as ever. A year after Moon Zappa's "Valley Girl" has faded from the radio, Patrick Goldstein, writing in *The Los Angeles Times'* "Calendar" section of March 25, 1984, reports:

"You have to wear your colors," explained Tom (Sir Ice-man) Guzman-Sanchez, the 25-year-old leader of Chain Reaction, a local dance gang that doubles as a power-funk band. "It's your badge—to show who you are and that you're down (cool). When people see that, it either makes them *chill out* (chicken out) or *break* on you (challenge you to a dance showdown) . . . You can't walk away from a *throwdown* (dance challenge) . . . Someone will challenge you by pointing at you when they're dancing or by *mouth*ing at you (making rude remarks about your ability)."

We need not ask what Orwell would say to this; but does this young dancer's exuberant use of words somehow threaten freedom of thought, or democratic institutions, or the sacred realm of Shakespeare? It certainly does not. Like Tolkien's or George's, this is a harmless, happy mini-language, arisen from the joy of making sounds.

Orwell was enraged and full of despair because of the world's political situation, but to blame the misuse of language for that was to blame the messenger for the bad news. Our English language is, in 1984, what it has always been: the flexible, indivisible skin of our thoughts, the fabric of our outer life that knits us to our cities, to our inventions

and our traditions. It swallows up all words, all creations, all corruptions, and it puts them each in a place that seems to have been prepared. Every word that people speak has a purpose, as do their silences and their gestures, and even the most debased language can glow with the strivings for expression of the people who use it.

The following is a poem by Wilma Elizabeth McDaniel, which appears in *Wormwood Review* #86, published in 1982. It is written in the flattened vocabulary of ordinary speech, a style which Orwell might consider "gabbling . . . staccato and monotonous." To me, it is eloquent, both in its own imagery and in the new possibilities of contemporary speech:

MESSENGER

José painted a blue
angel
on the side of the labor
camp building
used to go out there and
sit and think
after work in the fields
One evening
the angel spoke to him
José
Leave this place tonight

We don't need to invent a new language; in 1984, we are still working on the one we have. Does anyone believe that the English language already has expressed all the complexity of life, and that its mission has already been fulfilled?