TURNING TO ORWELL TO UNDERSTAND ORWELL'S PROBLEM: A SOCIOLINGUISTIC VIEW

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Abstract

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Drawing on the works of groundbreaking linguists and sociolinguists of the likes of Noam Chomsky, Ferdinand de Saussure and Benjamin Lee Whorf, this paper traces the origins of *Orwell's Problem* by depicting the fictional sociolinguistic scenario presented in the classic *Nineteen Eighty-four*. A syntactic, morphological and semantic description of Orwell's fictitious language, 'Newspeak' (which is here addressed from a deterministic perspective), is followed by an analysis of the main social institutions found in the novel. Thereupon, Orwell's novel is depicted as a symbolic model for understanding how *Orwell's Problem* functions in real life.

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Introduction

The idea of *'manufacturing consent'* had been looming over popular intuition since long before Walter Lippman coined such term in 1921. Nonetheless, it was not until Chomsky formally reintroduced *Orwell's Problem* that the issue of sociolinguistic oppression began to receive serious, mainstream attention. Put succinctly, *Orwell's Problem* poses the question of how it is that individuals have such a limited knowledge of the immediate world in the face of unlimited evidence. When attempting to answer that question, most scholars and specialists look into reality in order to analyze and reflect on instances of *Orwell's Problem* in particular societies. Unfortunately, despite the valuable contributions that such procedures have resulted in, no study has as of yet been able to address the matter in its full dimension.

Although trying to find a comprehensive, progressive explanation of *Orwell's Problem* in the very novel which presented it to popular opinion may be deemed an oversimplistic or clumsily paradoxical task, the systematic abstraction of real-life scenarios and institutions carried out by Orwell in *1984* provides a perfect scaffold for exposing the links among the main sociolinguistic factors which cater for 'consent to be manufactured.' Consequently, *Orwell's Problem* can be better understood –and its real-life instances more thoroughly analyzed– if the very *1984* is used as a model whose fictional, symbolic 'slots' can be replaced by specific real-life characters, institutions and scenarios.

Overview

Over the last two centuries, few were the governments around the world which have not tried to either gain or impose popular support by molding the masses' language and cultural conventions through powerful speeches, constant propaganda and witty euphemisms. Although such

sociolinguistic resources have proven immensely useful to rulers of all kinds, dictators and autocrats have capitalized on the aforementioned mechanisms like no one else. In fact, no tool has ever served the despotic ambitions of a totalitarian government as efficiently as lexical and semantic manipulation combined with an oppressive cultural environment.

In George Orwell's novel *1984*, Oceania's citizens were under the ruling of a socialist governmental organization known as the Party. Embodied in the image of an all-powerful leader known as Big Brother, the Party relied on carefully devised means of sociolinguistic oppression to establish the ultimate totalitarian system. In Oceania, there was no linguistic or cultural institution which had not been specifically designed to inculcate orthodoxy, i.e. total subjugation and worship of Big Brother. Of all those institutions, *Newspeak* (the country's official language) was arguably the most outstanding one.

The purpose of this paper is to depict the foundations of *Orwell's Problem* by providing a sequenced analysis of the sociolinguistic mechanisms which allowed the Party to shape the mental disposition and behavioral patterns of its subjects. The findings of such an analysis should allow for real cases of 'manufacturing consent' to be better understood.

Built upon contemporary linguistic and anthropologic theories, this paper is divided into three main parts. The first one consists of an in-depth description of Newspeak's origins, grammar and vocabulary. The second part depicts how the Party established an indestructible regime by controlling people's language, thoughts and social conventions. Finally, the paper concludes with a brief discussion drawing a message of caution from the novel.

An Insight into Newspeak

Newspeak's Fictional and Real-life Genesis

To get a clear and concise picture of the language's genesis and objectives within the plot of the novel, one needs but to read this brief excerpt from *1984*'s appendix 'The Principles of Newspeak':

> *Newspeak was the official language of Oceania and had been devised to meet the ideological needs of Ingsoc, or English Socialism... The purpose of Newspeak was not only to provide a medium of expression for the worldview and mental habits proper to the devotees of Ingsoc, but to make all other modes of thought impossible.* (Orwell, 1949:246).

Nevertheless, a proper analysis of the origins of Newspeak requires that the real-world scenarios which inspired Orwell to create this unique language also be addressed.

Written in 1949, *1984* may be considered an epitome of the author's main sociopolitical concerns, of which the use of language by totalitarian governments was a most important one. Orwell spent many of his years as a journalist brooding on the social and linguistic scenarios imposed by Nazism and Stalinism, two systems that relied on a combination of violence, specific jargon and carefully contrived propaganda to spread their dogmas and justify their atrocities. *1984*, however, does not reflect sociolinguistic oppression as practiced by the dictatorships of the time in which the book was written; rather, the novel functions as a warning of the limits to which a totalitarian government could push linguistic manipulation when attempting to subjugate the populace.

Newspeak, then, as well as every other linguistic peculiarity in Oceania, derives its origin from a compendium of real events processed through Orwell's most tragic imaginations. Indeed, all characteristics of this fictitious language have some relation to real life, and they can be analyzed by

applying actual linguistic and sociolinguistic theories. Conceived as a devise for exerting power over individuals by narrowing their range of thought, Newspeak is to be seen as an imaginary yet perfectly feasible language.

In the fictional dystopian world presented in *1984*, the institution of Newspeak was largely possible because the Party did not seek to create a new language from scratch, but to tailor *Oldspeak* (or Standard English) to the tyrannical purposes and needs of the government. In other words, Newspeak was not an original language, but a biased version of an existing one. Furthermore, it must be noted that the version of Newspeak used in the year 1984 was a provisional one, and that the final version –which was still being perfected– was not expected to supersede Oldspeak until the year 2050. All these facts need to be taken into account in order to understand, on the one hand, why and how it was possible for the Party to create Newspeak, and, on the other, why and how it was still possible for people like Winston Smith (*1984*'s main character) to achieve unorthodoxy.

Newspeak Grammar

The grammar of Newspeak had two outstanding features. The first of these was an almost complete interchangeability between different parts of speech. This morphosyntactic eccentricity implied that any word in the language could be used as verb, noun, adjective or adverb, the roots of all words in a lexical family deriving from only one arbitrarily chosen form. Thus, word formation in Newspeak was almost absolutely systematized following a few basic rules: nouns could be used as verbs and vice versa (in fact, there was a syntactic category named noun-verb), adjectives were formed by adding the suffix *-ful* to a noun-verb, and adverbs by adding *-wise*.

Moreover, any word could be turned into its antonym by adding the affix *un-,* or could be strengthened by the affix *plus-*, or, for still greater emphasis, *doubleplus-*. It was also possible to modify the meanings of almost any word by prepositional affixes such as *ante-*, *post-*, *up-*, *down-*, etc. For example, the Oldspeak utterance *'Mary cut the tempting bread carefully and enjoyed a fantastic meal'* could be translated into Newspeak as follows: *'Mary knifed the temptful bread carewise and enjoyed a doubleplusgood meal.'*

The second distinguishing mark of Newspeak was its regularity. Apart from a few exceptions –namely the pronouns, the relatives, the demonstrative adjectives and the auxiliary verbs–, all inflections followed the same rules: all preterits and past participles ended in *–ed*, all plurals were formed by adding *-s* or *-es* depending on the spelling of the word, and all comparative and superlative forms were made by adding *-er* or *-est* to the adjectives. For instance, the Oldspeak sentence *'I met the two most intelligent men in the world'* would translate into the Newspeak statement *'I meeted the two undumbest mans in the world.'*

As seen in this section, the Party aimed at circumscribing Newspeak grammar as much as possible. By counting on a totally systematized grammar, Oceania's government not only drastically reduced the vocabulary available to its subjects (an issue that will be dealt with in section 3.1) but also fostered a *strictly defined psycholinguistic model*. Thanks to that model, the Party was able to maximize its chances of creating a predictable, orthodox society for which groundless mechanization would eventually seem natural. The Party understood that, for human beings, the grammar of a particular language represents an internalized system (Chomsky, 1965), and capitalized on that fact to begin dictating people's personalities from the subconscious, that is to say, the complex of mental activities which subliminally affect individuals' general behavior

(Freud, 1939). Once a person is subconsciously adapted to coping with unfounded restrictions, the task of limiting and controlling his or her conscious world becomes readily attainable.

Newspeak Vocabulary

As unusual as Newspeak grammar was, Newspeak vocabulary consisted of three lexical categories: the A, B, and C Vocabularies. Firstly, the A Vocabulary comprehended all words employed in everyday life. It was composed almost entirely of words existing in Oldspeak, but their number was extremely small, and each of them conveyed one sole specific concept. Examples of the A Vocabulary included words such as *run*, *hit*, *house* and *field*, all modifiable according to the word formation principles described in the previous section.

Secondly, the B Vocabulary was made up of compound words that had been constructed to impose a desirable political and mental attitude upon the person using them. No word in the B Vocabulary was ideologically neutral, and a great many were euphemisms. Telescoped words such as *Recdep* (Records Department) or *Minitrue* (Ministry of Truth) were also included in this vocabulary. The shortness of the words in the B Vocabulary, alongside their consistent intonational patterns, encouraged a gabbling style of speech. All in all, the underlying purpose of the B Vocabulary was to make political speech as nearly as possible independent of consciousness. Remarkable terms within this vocabulary include *goodthinkful* (orthodox), *joycamp* (forced labor camp), *sexcrime* (any sexual act done for a reason other than creating a future devotee of the Party) and *doublethink* (a complex notion that implied holding two contradictory beliefs in one's mind simultaneously, and accepting both of them while altering one's memories in the direction required by Big Brother).

Finally, the C Vocabulary was supplementary to the others and consisted entirely of scientific and technical terms. Noticeably enough, only scientific workers or technicians handled these words, but they were only allowed to learn those that directly applied to their own speciality. Nevertheless, Newspeak had no word which meant 'Science', any meaning that such locution could possibly bear being already sufficiently covered by the word *Ingsoc*.

The Relation between Language, Thought, Culture and Power in Oceania

The Sapir-Whorf Hypothesis Meets Big Brother

In the 1930's, the American linguists Edward Sapir and Benjamin Lee Whorf introduced a revolutionary linguistic theory which was equally enlightening and controversial. They postulated that human thoughts –and consequently, people's perception of the world– are determined by language. Nonetheless, inconsistencies in their postulation gave rise to two opposing interpretations of the theory. On the one hand, the so called extreme version of the hypothesis claims that the determining effect of language on thought is *total*, that is to say, that people can only think in terms of what can be expressed by means of their language. On the other hand, a moderate version of the hypothesis acknowledges some direct incidence of language on thought, but entirely disregards total determinism. Despite having been proved wrong by modern Linguistics, the extreme version is the one that best describes the nightmarish totalitarian system depicted in *1984*.

Although completely inapplicable from a pragmatic viewpoint, this extreme version of the hypothesis functions as an exacerbated symbol of what could actually occur if a government were in absolute control of its population's language. On devising Newspeak, the Party evidenced a

thorough understanding of how language can be twisted into a major tool for controlling people's minds. The government's attempts to eradicate all 'heretical' thoughts ranged three main aspects of the language.

Firstly, the Party conducted a vicious *program of lexical reduction* which would deprive party members of any notion or idea that may contradict the principles of Ingsoc. Acting on the premise that 'We dissect nature along lines laid down by our native language' (Whorf, 1940: 229-31), the Party strove to create a new linguistic system in which no word that could jeopardize their allmightiness was allowed to survive. Apart from mere lexical suppression, this process also involved more subtle mechanisms such as the narrowing of links between lexis and semantics. The Party sought to strip all words of unorthodox and secondary meanings, so that each linguistic item would convey only one precise idea, and associations between concepts could only lead to Party-endorsed conclusions. The word 'free', for instance, could be used to say 'a dog is free from lice', but it could not be employed in the sense of 'politically or intellectually free', as those concepts no longer existed.

Secondly, by blurring the connection between words and the concepts they denote, the Party *distorted the intrinsic constitution of linguistic signs*. All linguistic signs comprise two components: the signifier (set of speech sounds or marks on a page) and the signified (the concept behind the sign) (Saussure, 1916-1959). The unrelenting exposure to paradoxes and contradictions, alongside the overtly oppressive atmosphere and the exercise of *doublethink*, led people to conventionally accept that confuted signifieds naturally coexisted within one sole signifier. Thus, people in Oceania did not hesitate to regard poverty as plenty, ignorance as strength, and slavery as freedom, to cite but a few egregious cases. Furthermore, this manipulation of linguistic signs went beyond propagandistic resources –such as the Party slogans or the names of Oceania's ministries–, and progressively took over all jargon used in everyday personal affairs. Indeed, if party devotees in *1984* had been asked to explain the signified of the signifier 'sex', their answer would surely have been 'patriotic martyrdom'.

Finally, the Party coined countless new words arising from their despotic worldview. The introduction of new terminology aided the suppression of undesirable words in the government's ultimate goal of complete populace brainwashing. As if by an instinctive mechanism of survival, Oceania's citizens easily assimilated novel Newspeak terms which were indispensable to frame reality according to Big Brother's precepts. Words such as *facecrime* (wearing a facial expression suggesting unorthodoxy), *thoughtcrime* (thinking in an unorthodox manner), *doublethink* and *goodthinkful* spread throughout the society as conscious devices necessary to mold one's mind and thus prevent execution. In fact, in *1984*, all linguistically induced thought manipulation was possible because of a patent threat against the life of potential rebels.

Thought and Culture in Oceania

Once each party member's thoughts had been successfully put under tight control, Oceania's government had to ensure that all oppressed individuals build up to a new culture. Enhancing its ruling generation after generation, the Party sought to eventually reach the day in which people would regard Big Brother's life schema as the natural flow of life. So complex a process required both linguistic and non-linguistic methods, the genesis of the former having been introduced in section 3.1. But before analyzing the process thoroughly, an authoritative definition of culture is in order. The highly acclaimed linguist and anthropologist Ward Goodenough defines culture in the

following terms: 'As I see it, a society's culture consists of whatever it is one has to know or believe in order to operate in a manner acceptable to its members…' (Goodenough, 1957: 167-73).

It is then possible to assert that culture is the sum of individual thoughts, collectively conventionalized to meet certain social axioms –in Oceania's case, those imposed by the principles of *Ingsoc*. Moreover, it can be gathered that, apart from language, there are other aspects of social life that determine what a culture is like. Since human beings acquire most of their behavioral patterns and their linguistic-cognitive traits by means of exposure to a particular system (Chomsky, 1965), it is only a matter of time for a society to instinctively adapt to a new cultural environment. Whereas the process by which linguistic elements contributed to creating a culture in *1984* may be explained as a *natural propagation* of the lexical and semantic systems instituted by the Party, the non-linguistic resources used in achieving total dominion call for a more detailed description. Thus, the three most important non-linguistic culture forming methods will be next presented individually:

- *Denial of objective reality:* in *1984*, surviving was not just a matter of remaining passive against the government. In fact, party members needed to *feel*, *think* and *know* that quality of life in Oceania was excellent and that Big Brother was a figure worth adoring. This could only be achieved by tricking one's mind into believing that reality naturally consisted of whatever was dictated, and not of whatever was evidenced or perceived. Towards the end of the novel, it is Orwell himself who succinctly explains how this mental disposition affected Oceania's society and culture: 'All happenings are in the mind. Whatever happens in all minds, truly happens.' (Orwell, 1949: 291).

- *Creation of specific institutions:* to a great extent, beliefs and cultural behavior are determined by habits and notions promoted by popular institutions (e.g. religious, political or recreational). Oceania's government acknowledged this fact and set up different organizations fostering hatred, disloyalty, and repression of potentially disruptive practices. Two noteworthy examples are the Junior Anti-Sex League (which aimed at killing the sex instinct) and the Spies (which induced children to blindly love Big Brother and his principles).

- *Mutability of the past:* a society's cultural identity is largely defined by its past. Eagerness to look back on history to learn from past mistakes and to understand current affairs is a crucial driving force for a society's enlightenment and evolution. By introducing *doublethink* as a core duty towards orthodoxy, the Party was able to establish a cultural medium in which the past could –and actually had to– be constantly modified to fit a rambling present in which Big Brother was always right. The continual destruction and reformulation of past documents made this self-deceiving process a lot more endurable, and, somehow, a lot less noticeable.

As seen in this section, the Party was in complete control of all the main elements which determine social consciousness. History, social institutions and even present reality were subject to the dictatorial will of Big Brother. Therefore, it can be gathered that for Oceania's government controlling cultural conventions and practices went hand in hand with controlling people's language and thoughts.

Enforcing an Everlasting Dictatorship

The Party's design was clear: they aimed at creating an inhumanly despotic system that could never be abolished. Seeking to cling to power ever after, the Party turned to the most despicable means of social domination, and however loathsome their methods may have been, they are to be regarded as immensely successful. Unlike Oceania's citizens, the Party –always embodied in the figure of Big Brother– had the chance to assess the past and draw valuable lessons from it, and, in doing so, they managed to perfect Totalitarianism by recognizing the weaknesses of previous dictatorships.

There were three main factors differentiating Big Brother's dictatorship from those of old-time autocrats such as Hitler, Stalin and Mussolini: 1) Big Brother controlled *all* social conventions; 2) Big Brother dictated *reality*, and not just mere rules; and, most importantly, 3) Big Brother was infallible and beloved. The first of these factors has already been analyzed in section 3.2, and the remaining two can be assayed as follows. Whereas Hitler, Stalin and Mussolini dictated what life *should be* like, Big Brother dictated what life *was* like. The Party was able to recognize the subtle difference between *forcing people to comply with rules* and *forcing people to want to comply with rules*, and relied on the linguistic and non-linguistic mechanisms previously introduced to achieve the latter *(see sections 3.1 and 3.2)*.

Naturally, the Party knew that creating such willingness to being subdued required that a flawless supreme leader be granted power. Regardless of whether he was an actual person or a symbolic figure, Big Brother was indeed an infallible dictator who, thanks to sociolinguistic institutions such as *doublethink, Newspeak* and *thoughtcrime*, evoked admiration, fanaticism and even deep love. Hitler's, Stalin's and Mussolini's oppressive schemata failed because, ultimately, they triggered popular hatred towards the government. Consequently, the Party made sure that all citizens in Oceania were indoctrinated in loving the unimpeachable Big Brother. Needless to say, people are not likely to ever revolt against a 'perfect' being whom they earnestly love.

Final Discussion and Afterthought

As seen throughout this paper, Oceania's government relied on both linguistic and socio-cultural means of oppression to rule over its members. Newspeak's main objective was to reduce the range of thought of the population, making it almost impossible for people to articulate thoughts opposing Big Brother's ruling. Moreover, several institutions as well as tacit conventions paved the way towards orthodoxy. Deviating from the Party's norms and customs, be it by enjoying fornication or by producing an undesirable utterance, meant immediate death in the best of cases. Even unuttered critical thinking was regarded as a punishable offense.

As explained earlier, this paper seeks only to provide an organized layout of the various interrelated factors deriving in 'manufacturing consent.' Henceforth, it is up to the reader to assign specific real-life concepts to the symbolic features previously analyzed, and to thus arrive at a logical account of how *Orwell's Problem* operates in our world.[1]

Below is a concise example of the contrastive mechanisms this paper aims at:

In his 1985 book 'Knowledge of Language: its Nature, Origins and Use', Chomsky provides a brief account of a Russian journalist by the name Vladimir Danchev. In 1983, during the so called Russian defense of Afghanistan, Danchev deviated from the 'official' media behavior and began to

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[1] It must be noticed that not *all* of the institutions, conventions and concepts found in the novel can be directly paralleled to real-life cases.

incite rebels to fight back Russia's 'invasion' of their country. As if he were a modern-day Winston Smith, Danchev was forced to undergo psychiatric treatment as advised by the Russian government. After Danchev's 'sanity' had been restored, a soviet officer stated: 'He was not punished, for a sick man is not to be punished.'

The following chart completes this attempt to exemplify how it is possible to create direct links between the analysis carried out throughout the paper and real-life scenarios. Needless to say, this basic contrastive proposal is built upon the premise that drawing on extreme (though fictional) cases leads to more accurate and revealing conclusions:

1984	*Danchev's case*
Newspeak	*Pro-Russian speech / Soviet political correctness*
Doublethink	*Sanity is Insanity*
Orthodoxy	*Acknowledging Mother Russia as a flawless entity*
Unorthodoxy	*Advocating a response against Russia's invasion / Going against the media trends governing Russia at the time*
The Party	*The Kremlin*
Thoughtcrime	*Discerning an injustice in Russia's 'defence of Afghanistan'*
Denial of objective reality	*Historical account of Russia's invasion of Afghanistan as the 'Soviet defence of Afghanistan'*
Mutability of the past	
Distortion of intrinsic constitution of linguistic signs	*The signified 'invasion' is given the signifier 'defense'*

All in all, *1984* reflects the major influence that language and culture have on individual will and mental disposition. It has been shown that lexis, semantics and social conventions might rightly be deemed the most dangerous tools a totalitarian government has at its disposal to exert power on its subjects. In addition, the fact that actual linguistic and sociolinguistic theories prove applicable to analyze the novel indicates that most of the situations and institutions can be used to anchor real-life instances of *Orwell's Problem*. Therefore, understanding the sociolinguistic scenario in Oceania will help modern societies to discern how consent is manufactured in the real world.

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