

## LANGUAGE AND POWER IN GEORGE ORWELL'S "1984"

*Erkinov Adham Anvar o'g'li*

*CSPU Tourism faculty*

*Foreign Languages and Literature stage 3 student*

*Scientific advisor: **Matenova Feruza***

**Abstract:** *This article focuses on Orwell's views and opinions on language and its connections with power, thought, reality, truth etc. With the aid of modern linguistics and philosophy, these connections and other concepts regarding language are described in the first part of the paper. On the basis of this theoretical framework, the second part of the paper analyses Orwell's views on language and power, thought, reality, truth etc. and the way Orwell implements them into his last novel Nineteen Eight-Four.*

**Keywords:** *George Orwell, language, discourse, reality, truth, thought, signs, power, Newspeak, linguistics.*

### Introduction

Ever since the first unintelligible utterances of ancient cavemen, some 50,000 to 100,000 years ago, humankind has used language with various intentions to this day. Though its exact origins and purposes still remain subjects of discussion, one thing is clear; language is one of the distinguishing marks that differentiates people from animals, and constitutes an inseparable part of their everyday life.

Language has been used for many diverse reasons; to form new friendships, profess love, pray to God, express innermost desires, voice fears and incite hatred. It has been a site of wonderful human creations, but it is also a powerful instrument that often becomes a weapon in the hands of those who



realize its potential. In this day and age, when disputes are provoked and settled with words rather than guns, language gains an unprecedented importance.

George Orwell, the famous British novelist, essayist, journalist, and critic, definitely realizes the potential of this metaphorical weapon that resides in the human mind and shoots its bullets from the larynx in lieu of the muzzle. Language and its connection with thought, reality, power, truth etc. thus represent recurring themes in his novels and essays.

This paper sets to explore and analyze Orwell's thoughts on language and power in his work on the basis of theories that have been proposed and developed by linguist and philosophers over decades from all over the world.

#### Literature Review

The following paragraphs scrutinize the presence of ideological power in language, its naturalization, preservation and reproduction. All these concepts are necessary for the subsequent analysis of Orwell's theory of language.

Language is not pure; it is messy and contaminated by ideologies; "beliefs system which are held either collectively or individually by social groups."<sup>1</sup> Despite being taken for granted, ideologies are often false and clouded<sup>2</sup> and thus may deceive by providing an erroneous view of the world.<sup>3</sup> Ideology, in this traditional Marxist sense, becomes a creator of "false consciousness, meanings and ideas."<sup>4</sup> However, Hutcheon notes that the perception of ideology as "false consciousness" or as an "illusory belief system" is rather old-fashioned and states the current notion of ideology is that of "a general process of production of meaning."<sup>5</sup> The latter definition is intentionally cautious, for linguists are

<sup>1</sup> Paul Simpson and Andrea Mayr, *Language and Power: A Resource Book for Students* (London: Routledge, 2010), 4.

<sup>2</sup> Edelman, *The Politics of Misinformation*, 87.

<sup>3</sup> Mark Robson and Peter Stockwell, *Language in Theory A Resource Book for Students* (New York: Routledge, 2005), 8.

<sup>4</sup> Fiske, *Introduction to Communication Studies*, 165.

<sup>5</sup> Linda Hutcheon, *A Poetics of Postmodernism* (London: Routledge, 1988), 178.





generally reluctant to differentiate between ideological and non-ideological meanings.

As will be demonstrated in the final subchapter, it is mainly this problem that divides scholars. Nevertheless, Fairclough and some other critical discourse analysts take a clear stance and view ideology as “meaning in the service of power.”<sup>6 7</sup> It is this definition that is employed in this paper.

In order to function properly, ideology must be concealed; it must be naturalized. Naturalization is an important means of control in political discourse, whose participants are always ready to provide the right, appropriate images and indisputable meanings of words.<sup>8</sup> Yet meanings are also a matter of common sense; it is taken as a fact that a word means what it means. In reality, however, since meanings are not fixed in nature, they are constantly changing, shifting and overlapping, creating complex structures that Fairclough calls “meaning systems.” Fairclough warns that any effort to fix a particular meaning from the meaning system is an effect of ideological power and that it is the goal of the dominant class to sustain and consequently naturalize those meanings as if they were the only possible interpretations despite them being one of many. It is stressed that the main goal of the powerful is to transform their beliefs and meanings into the legitimized common-sense of others and suppress those that do not comply with them. As Robson notes, the momentarily fixed meanings, sometimes called “moments,” are “illusions of permanence” that establish “historical and cultural periods of repression and control over group regarded as marginal.”

Thus, vagueness is seen as an innate property of language, from which a great deal of creativity stems and which should not be suppressed but actually reinforced. Edelman stresses that exaggeratedly precise language is undesirable,

<sup>6</sup> Andrew Goatly, *Washing the Brain – Metaphor and Hidden Ideology* (Amsterdam: John Benjamins Publishing Company, 2007), 1.

<sup>7</sup> Andrea Mayr, *Language and Power: An Introduction to Institutional Discourse* (London: Continuum, 2008), 11.

<sup>8</sup> Edelman, *The Politics of Misinformation*, 14.



for it is through vagueness that humans are able to create new meanings and criticize the current ones. Clarity and rigidity would inevitably lead to orthodoxy and reduced thinking: “pure, unproblematic use of language, such as ritualized, consensually understood language, poses no mental challenges and so makes for mental vegetation rather than alertness.” Typical examples include meaningless political slogans and phrases that solely function as “buttresses of a ritualized position.” Such language is desired by those who seek to control society, for it might lead to the reproduction of discourses as opposed to production of new ones.

The task of naturalization largely depends on social institutions and is accumulative. By being exposed to an enormous number of discourses which cannot all be sorted and subjected to criticism, the brains of unaware people are rewired to serve the interests of the powers that be.

Since interpretation is not simply a matter of decoding what is in the individual words but rather a complex process between meaning systems, metaphors, frames, the situational and cultural context, brains must make sense of this complexity to categorize into memory. Human brains therefore: “dispense with the mass of its detail and reduce it to the skeletal shape of the familiar pattern.” A pattern, such as a “schema” and “script”, already naturalized in MR which bears “the ideological imprint.” Language in this sense works as a “compressing device.” Thus, even though people produce their seemingly own discourse, it is inevitably shaped by naturalized ideologies in their MR. This way, they support and reproduce already existing discourses with little or no adjustment at all, for they are unaware of the ideological nature of MR.<sup>9</sup>

Hence, despite there being innumerable ways of saying something, or as Chomsky frequently cites Humboldt’s words: “infinite use of finite means”<sup>68</sup>, a substantial number of discourses are excluded and might never be uttered. Consequently, statements produced within a particular discourse are rather

<sup>9</sup> Fairclough, Language and power, 39.





repetitive, similar and ritualistic. Bourdieu declares this is the result of self-censorship by means of which people subconsciously produce language that is anticipated rather than consciously thought by themselves. Edelman adds that as a result of ritualistic speech, subjects hardly think when they speak. Fairclough, however, warns against exaggeration, for “the subject is both created and creative.”<sup>10</sup> This is obvious, for if there were no creativity of subjects, the whole culture would be stagnant.

### Conclusion

As with many contemporary linguists, Orwell observes the limits of language to reflect thought and reality accurately. Similarly, he strives to avoid automatic reproduction of discourses and promote their plurality and clarity by raising critical awareness and self-criticism. However, most people are indifferent to meanings that language evokes in them and, since language and society are inseparable entities influencing one another, they might be prone to being passive reproducers rather than active contributors. Orwell endeavours to prevent that but contrary to present-day linguists who adopt a non-intrusive, descriptive approach, he decides to make use of empirical prescriptivism to achieve rejuvenation of language, thought and society regardless of its limits and potential dangers of achieving the opposite result if taken to the extreme. By the unification of thought and reality Orwell desperately attempts to find an acceptable compromise, a state of equilibrium, between two radical positions; extreme rigidity (and simplicity) of Ogden’s Basic and extreme ambiguity that might partly stem from Saussure’s original, anti-empirical version of his system – neither of which, as Orwell correctly criticizes in the form of A and B vocabulary of Newspeak, would be beneficial to language and thought were these systems applied and followed unconditionally.

Nonetheless, while Orwell’s indirect critique of Saussure’s denial of non-linguistic reality in his system of signs might be considered valid, Orwell’s

<sup>10</sup> Fairclough, Language and power, 104.



corrective system based on anchoring words to reality with the promise of rendering lying and misunderstanding impossible is at least on a large scale untenable, for non-linguistic reality most of the time does not function as a reliable, uniform referent independent of contextual and subjective contingency. His prescriptivism might make language more transparent to some degree and prevent/expose the most blatant exploitations of language, but it might easily become a burden hindering creativity were it applied ruthlessly.

Thus, the system remains a bold but desperate and potentially dangerous attempt to establish a sense of stability in much more complex and chaotic world of human language, thought and reality. It relies on pretending that language corresponds to the non-linguistic reality more than it really does and on acting accordingly. It depends on the individual's sincerity in the world where sincerity is due to the very nature of language, thought and reality at least for the time being unattainable.

Yet, in various claims Orwell displays an outstanding insight even with regard to contemporary theories such as linguistic relativity. Though the absence of language does not entail absence of thought and the ultimate goal of the Party is thus untenable, the semantics of language may indeed influence thinking. Therefore, the reduction of words may render rebellious thinking and speaking more difficult and ideologically pre-selected words may provoke certain ideologically-motivated thoughts.

As some modern thinkers, Orwell keeps a promise of achieving unbiased reality and sets against absolute relativism in which all truths are equal. Though his standards for discrimination are just as unclear and problematic, some standards however illusionary, arbitrary and unclear as they currently might be, Orwell emphasizes, must be held and protected, for their absence, as Orwell depicts in 1984, hinders the production of new discourses and renders the differentiation between even the most basic claims for truth impossible. Language should be allowed to transform and claims should be reconsidered but





some truths are, Orwell wants to convey, less false and insincere than others and must remain stable until proven empirically wrong or are no longer useful “fictions.”

**References:**

1. Paul Simpson and Andrea Mayr, *Language and Power: A Resource Book for Students* (London: Routledge, 2010), 4.
2. Edelman, *The Politics of Misinformation*, 87.
3. Mark Robson and Peter Stockwell, *Language in Theory A Resource Book for Students* (New York: Routledge, 2005), 8.
4. Fiske, *Introduction to Communication Studies*, 165.
5. Linda Hutcheon, *A Poetics of Postmodernism* (London: Routledge, 1988), 178.
6. Andrew Goatly, *Washing the Brain – Metaphor and Hidden Ideology* (Amsterdam: John Benjamins Publishing Company, 2007), 1.
7. Andrea Mayr, *Language and Power: An Introduction to Institutional Discourse* (London: Continuum, 2008), 11.
8. Edelman, *The Politics of Misinformation*, 14.
9. Fairclough, *Language and power*, 39; 104.

