

**The Corruption of Language or the Construction,
Deconstruction and Reconstruction of Words in
Modern Society as seen in
George Orwell's *Nineteen Eighty-Four***

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Abstract: George Orwell writes that ‘if thought corrupts language, language can also corrupt thought’ (Orwell, 1946:8). This remark only leads to a vicious circle where those who control language are in fact in charge of our thoughts, of what we think and in charge of the manner on how we have to react to our reality.

This paper aims to analyze the procedures that are used to control and undermine people’s freedom and also the importance of the meaning of the words that were used for such an endeavor.

If the destruction of words is ‘a beautiful thing’ (Orwell, 2015:65) and if every aspect of our life and common memory can be altered, we’ll have to ask ourselves what exactly is considered to be real and what is fiction. The answer to this question is not only philosophical but also scary for a fragile immature human intellect: reality only exists in one’s mind and nowhere else, meaning that all we can see, feel, touch, smell and hear is somehow part of our imagination and our experimentation of what we perceive as being real.

By exploring this Orwellian labyrinth of changing words and meanings, we can find out what consequences we can expect when we change past events and coin new meanings for the same old words.

Key words: language (corruption of), society, double meaning, altered (meaning), word

Even in ancient times, the corruption of language has never been strange to those who controlled or led the masses. They used complex words and unexpected or unusual phrase patterns in order to minimize the margin of understanding. George Carlin, the American stand-up comedian, called this ‘spooky language’, a group of words and phrases ‘designed to scare and control primitive people’, as he described it in his special HBO show *Complaints and Grievances* in 2001.

Sometimes, when we talk to someone about a topic that we do not know really much about, listen to a radio interview with a renowned physician, watch a TV presentation of a discovery or read an academic review, we sometimes have that feeling that we are missing the point or losing valuable information on the way. This can happen simply because we do not have any strong, academic background in that particularly field or because the words and the language used are misleading and leave room to misinterpretation and ambiguity. Having a solid foundation in a specific field can help the understanding and also can signify that the meaning of the words that are transmitted are known and recognized by a specific group of persons. The establishment can change and modify the core meaning of words and this process could lead to general confusion among the speakers of that particular language.

It would be very difficult to use a word if that word had two opposite meanings or a meaning that has been completely erased overnight.

The corruption of language is nowadays, more present than ever in our society. The purpose of this paper is to contribute to the theoretical understanding of how and why the language, and more specific, its main component, the words, can be corrupted, stripped of their meaning overnight and transformed in something

semantically ambiguous. In order to do that, we will discuss various excerpts from *Nineteen Eighty-Four* and also present some opinions on how the construction, deconstruction and reconstruction of words can be achieved.

Another key aspect that we are going to discuss is the great resemblance between the utopian society imagined by George Orwell in *Nineteen Eighty-Four* and the so-called modern society that we are living in today. Orwell realizes the overwhelming power that language has in politics, mainly by disguising or camouflaging the truth and deluding the people. We will talk about language and words and their role in manipulating the public.

Several studies have documented that George Orwell's beliefs about language and reality are indeed intriguing and worth further analysis. Berkes Jem and Stephen Conlin have both written essays that have identified that there is a close relation between the language we use and the perception of what we call reality.

Another important person that realized, at an early stage, the importance of language was the English philosopher and physician, John Locke.

Being considered one of the most influential thinkers of The Age of Enlightenment, Locke believed that language is a key element in binding the society, meaning basically that the ones that control the language can control in fact, the society.

Locke asks himself why people do choose to corrupt words and more specifically the meaning of the words. Regardless on which side truth, honesty and justice lay, there will always be people that will do anything to win an argument, to make some extra profit, or even to gain fame. These persons are ready to make all the necessary arrangements and to take action in order to see their goal achieved.

In Locke's view, introducing new and ambiguous terms without the proper definitions or even putting words together in order to confuse people is another strategy of corrupting language. He also states that the common and ultimate goal of this process is 'to darken truth and unsettle people's rights' (Kleidosty, 2017: 98).

We will discuss the corruption of language by analyzing various examples from the novel *Nineteen Eighty-Four* and we will also consider the possibility that creating and propagating false news is indeed an act of premeditated destruction of our society as we know it today. It is quite strange and not a large public expects to see linguistics as a dishonorable tool or part of a diabolic master plan, but as we will see later on, this aspect plays a key part in the conspiracy.

Against this background, the purpose of this research is to find out how the corruption of language can affect our community. More exactly, this research has two objectives:

1. To explore how the words are altered, by discussing examples and search for pertinent explanations of this meticulous process
2. To understand how the process of corrupting language works and how is still used in modern days.

The novel *Nineteen Eighty-Four* can be seen as a metaphysical comprehension of authoritarianism that can still serve us as an example of what political power implies and how the free will can be changed into terror. Paul Chilton, the emeritus professor of Lancaster University wrote that 'the book is an elaborate and rational anatomy of power processes' (Chilton, 1988:43-44). Besides being considered a good piece of literature, the readers are stunned on how a normal situation can degenerate and how things and history can change literally overnight.

The action of the novel is set in Oceania, in 1984. The main character, Winston Smith is a minor party functionary and his job is to rewrite history facts so as the political opinions for that period don't interfere with the past facts. The totalitarian government that runs the country is completely controlled by the Party and they have brainwashed the population into a blundering obedience to its master, the Big Brother.

Believing in contradictory ideas at the same time is named "doublethink". The three main principles of *Ingsoc* (English Socialism) are expressed in their slogans.

The slogans that the Party use are contradictory: "War is peace", "Ignorance is strength" and "Freedom is slavery".

The Party has produced these paradox phrases and coined a new language that can help them with their propaganda. This new language is called Newspeak and is crafted to obstruct the clear and free thinking. The institution that deals with the Newspeak and modifies the past events is The Ministry of Truth. We can see how in this kind of extended social control, the most important tool of propaganda is the WORD.

Being a primary tool of cognition, language helps us to keep track of our memories, of our past and enables us to gather information that we can afterwards classify in our minds. This leads to a simple result: the language helps our thoughts to exist and, more important, to communicate with other human beings. In order to classify information, we also need words and language.

It is indeed curious how the antonyms are used as a stylistic resource. If we take the phrase "War is peace", we can definitely see that the state of war and the disastrous condition of a war cannot be considered as a peaceful, tranquil situation. The words "war" and "peace" are antonyms and stand at the base of an oxymoron (from Greek "oxymoron", meaning "pointedly foolish"). The association of two contradictory words is not, in

this case, randomly. The totalitarian ruling class of Oceania tries to generate confusion, misunderstanding in the purpose of creating uncertainty, doubting and panic between its citizens. After the intellectual discomfort has been created, the authority steps in with the needed explanations, that are puerile and don't make much of a sense for an educated mind.

All the three slogans mentioned above embody some evident absurdity: in our cases, a contradiction in terms, meaning that the Ministry of Truth has employed a semantic change. In diachronic linguistics, these changes usually happen over a large period of time and only a small part of the mass vocabulary suffers from this phenomenon.

Every word has a variety of meanings and connotations that can be altered, added or even completely removed over time.

On the other hand, in *Nineteen Eighty-Four* this natural, rather slow process is systematically and artificially engineered with the aim of controlling the thoughts and feelings of the population.

“War is peace” propaganda has a simple official explanation: being constantly at war, this “motto” holds the society united, identified with their country’s goals and aspirations, hoping for a victory against Eastasia that fails to come. Being always under attack, the people of Oceania accept all the abusive measures that the Party takes. This powerful and corrupted apparatus operates like an octopus, that strikes with its strong tentacles in order to kill its prey. All the actions and decisions are taken from the headquarters of the Party.

The four ministries which are mentioned in the book are: ‘Ministry of Truth’, ‘Ministry of Love’, ‘Ministry of Peace’ and ‘Ministry of Plenty’ (Orwell, 2015). The names of these institutions have deliberately opposite meaning with their real purposes. For example, the Ministry of Peace deals with war

matters, The Ministry of Plenty is managing the food rationing, supplies and other goods, the Ministry of Truth deals with creating and spreading lies and last but not least, the Ministry of Love, tortures the citizens who do not agree with the Party's policies.

A better comprehension of our surroundings is given by the human capacity of using language and the potential to interact with the ones of our kind, by expressing our feelings and thoughts using words.

Power can be manifested by force, but more is needed to get into the depths of a human being. The solution that the party found is language. It can deceive and alter a person's thoughts to such an extent that he or she comes to believe that the views expressed are the fruit of individual thought but not a deliberate manipulation of one's senses.

Orwell was aware of the direct consequences of the modification of language. The limitations of language lead to the limitations of thought. The ambiguity of language, the semantic drift, the large number of unexpected word associations contaminate common tongue and block individuals from expressing their genuine thoughts.

The persons that are in charge of these acts are the main figures behind the Party, with their leading figure in charge: Big Brother.

The future that the author pictured is both surprising and worrying. He envisions a strict and authoritarian political class that will use lie and dishonesty as pillars of support for the immediate purpose of leading individuals to emotional and material collapse.

With the aim of disguising the truth, the Party makes use of buzz words (existing or new words that became very popular in a time period) which are always used in political discourses such as

“goodthink” or “crimethink”. Another way of concealing the political message is the use of “weasel words” or “anonymous authority” that are creating the impression that something important has been said, when in fact, these phrases are actually used just to amplify the ambiguity and made only to sound good and official. The weasel words can form part of a tergiversation and are commonly used in political discourses to disguise or mislead a biased view.

The corruption of language is realized through vague language and meaningless terms that perpetuate the idea of truth and “official position”. As the citizens of Oceania have only a source of information and documentation, it is impossible or almost impossible for them to have other opinion than the official narrative. It is easy to dismiss from the beginning any other source of documentation as being “fake” when the government grants itself the right to be the only source of information and, what is even worse, not allowing anyone to search for other opinion, to comment on it or discuss it with others.

As an editor for the Ministry of Truth, Winston Smith has to contribute at the words’ dismantling and consequently to the destruction of language as a whole. Two major objectives are considered when the past adjustment is employed:

1. The first auxiliary motif is that the citizens that belong to the Party do not have any other social instances that they could refer to in order to realise the status of their social life. The system needs to keep them in line and the citizens need to believe that their wellbeing is in a sustained improving process. This aspect is a definitory feature of any totalitarian state.
2. The second reason for rearranging the events from the past refers to the fact that the ruling system has to maintain its continuity and has to make use of any possible method of human control. The ruling class utilizes a wide range of elements in order

to keep up with the appearances: statistical data, discourses and all other kinds of public dissemination. Any change in the Party's doctrine cannot be admitted, because it would be considered a confession of weakness. When referring to the permanent enemy of Oceania, some people can vaguely remember that a few years before the country's enemy was Eastasia and not Eurasia. Such cases need to be dealt with strict and quick precision, by simply rewriting the parts that the leaders consider to be inexact.

The person that has to fulfill the job of readapting and correcting the texts is Winston. The problem appears when he accidentally uses some words that aren't allowed due to the fact that those words have officially disappeared or their meanings have completely changed. Winston doesn't feel like a part of the party's doctrine and doesn't agree with its politics. His friend Syme, on the other hand, thinks from the bottom of his heart that the word's destruction is a good thing to do. The Newspeak patterns are explained but for our modern society, they do not make much sense.

Syme agrees with the party's way to change the process of forming new words and new meanings. The new language that the party proposes is based on a simple structure, quite logical at first sight, but very primitive and harmful. This type of word forming leads us to the beginnings of communication, when primitive people used simple means of understanding one another.

If we take, for example, the word 'good' in order to express a good deed, a nice thing or a bright attitude, to express the opposite of this word, the party considers that there is no need for other different words, but can be used to the same base form, adding only the prefix 'un'. The resulting word is 'ungood' which can express a wide range of meanings. It is also recommended that if people want to use terms expressing superlative, they need to use prefixes like 'plus' or 'doubleplus'.

According to the party's opinion, the resulting words are more than enough to express the desired ideas. The party's doctrine is trying to reduce the number of words, to change their meaning and thus create a general semantic confusion, so that citizens cannot express ideas contradictory to party politics, as they do not have a proper vocabulary to carry out this endeavor.

Although Syme enjoys the destruction of words, Winston knows that the process is disturbing, dangerous and manipulative.

The construction and reconstruction of words are active parts of the Newspeak fictional language. At the end of the novel, Orwell describes *The Principles of Newspeak*. Its admitted purpose from the beginning was to offer "medium of expression for the world-view and mental habits proper to the devotees of Ingsoc, but to make all other modes of thought impossible." (Orwell, 1946: 377).

The ruling class believed that once the Oldspeak (Standard English) was forgotten and while The Newspeak was constantly pushed forward and used more and more, the possibility to have an aggressive thought toward the Party was reduced to a minimum as there were no proper words to be able to express this heretic thought. The possibility of leading a conclusion by yourself was also limited. The fact comes to life through a series of proceedings which incorporate the coining of new words or amending the ones that exist already, doing their best to remove the words that do not serve them.

The example used by the author is of paramount importance. The word 'free' is kept in the new language but its meanings are restricted, leaving no room for the idea of freedom of thought to be expressed.

All words that might express thoughts or opinions that are hostile to the party will be eliminated. Only those words and

meanings that are considered by the party to be clean of any negative connotations will be allowed to survive.

The words in Newspeak were divided into three main groups: the A vocabulary, the B vocabulary (for compound words), and the C vocabulary.

The A vocabulary was formed of everyday, common words, such as: sleep, eat, read, work but the amount of words is considerably lower than the amount of words that we have in the English vocabulary at the present and they have already been stripped of all the secondary or ambiguous meanings. It was impossible to use this type of words for literature, political or metaphysical discussions. It was deliberately created to express only basic objects and concrete physical actions, with no shadow of doubt.

The B vocabulary was formed of words that have been intentionally created for political motivation and had been reconditioned where needed to shape the speaker's mental attitude.

We have another good example of B vocabulary in the following excerpt from a "Times" article: *OLDTHINKERS UNBELLYFEELINGSOC*. As it was intended, the majority of people couldn't make any sense of this sentence whatsoever. The translation into Oldspeak is: "Those whose ideas were formed before the Revolution cannot have a full emotional understanding of the principles of English Socialism" (Orwell, 2015).

The B words were not constructed after any etymological scheme and no word was ideologically neutral. A large part of these words were euphemisms, such as JOYCAMP, which basically meant "forced-labour camp".

The C vocabulary was seen as an annex to the other two classes and was containing scientific and technical terms.

The modern society in which we all live in has many common aspects with the dystopian society imagined by George Orwell in his acclaimed novel.

It is true that the most intense characteristic of language, essential for a dictatorship, it is not only the destruction of words but of the words that have a great power over thoughts. By dismantling basic terms and changing also their use, the ruling party can convert the meaning of a concept, especially if that concept happens to be abstract.

In other words, the linguistic process of decay that needs to be omitted for maintaining the liberty of the individuals is exactly the same procedure in which the words are transformed and cleared of any meaning. 'Doublethink' is a way of playing and manipulating language.

The aim of the present research was to examine how the corruption of language and the alteration of the meanings of words can affect our social life, and even more, how the decadence of language plays a vital role in expressing our needs and aspirations.

It was never easy to express our feelings, but if the language becomes more and more vague and ambiguous and the meanings of words are deliberately diminished, expressing our true thoughts could become impossible in the future.

It is very important to keep an eye on the language we use and on the meanings of the words we use. The voluntary or involuntary intoxication of the readers, listeners or watchers by scandalous TV-shows, radio and movie of inferior quality lead in an end to a general moral decay of our society.

Indeed, with the help of social media, we can make ourselves heard and seen lot easier and more quickly than three decades ago, but it seems that the quality of our discourse doesn't have the same quality as it used to have in past.

According to *The United States Declaration of Independence*, imagined by Thomas Jefferson during the beginning of the American Revolution in 1776, all citizens should be equal and should have the same immutable rights. The nowadays society and the one imagined by Orwell are not so different and it seems that both ruling groups are making use of a great weapon: the word.

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