THE PRINCIPLES OF NEWSPEAK OR HOW LANGUAGE DEFINES REALITY IN ORWELL'S 1984

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Abstract

George Orwell in *1984* vividly depicts a totalitarian regime which draws upon multiple resources and an array of methods in order to control the minds of the individuals. In this paper, an argument is made that the true struggle between the collective and individual identity is underway in the domain of the totalizing discourse, and the discourse is a linguistic entity. It has been discussed how language is the only means by which the understanding of the world, both in its objective and subjective manifestations, is made possible and how the aspirations of the Oceania regime towards the control of the language, which is seen in its attempt to create Newspeak, is the key step towards the realization of a fully totalitarian ruling power. Then distinctive features of the Orwellian Newspeak are closely investigated to demonstrate how Newspeak functions by reducing the number of words in lexicon, hacking down the semantic horizons of the existing vocabulary and rigorously doing away with ambiguities and shades of meaning. It is argued that ambiguities and indeterminacy markers are the opportunities for the users of the language to practice their creative powers, and the Orwellian attempt to dispose of them in Newspeak is the final realization of totalitarianism that can be imaginable.

Keywords: Newspeak, Totalitarianism, Totalizing Discourse.

George Orwell's *1984* is an exceptionally-profound look into the inner mechanisms of a society under the stringent rule of a fully-totalitarian* regime. Orwell's personal aspirations as a leftist activist as well as his undeniable literary genius has made 1984 a thought- provoking masterpiece about the consequences of the hierarchical organization of power in a centralized economy around a patriarchal figure. Orwell's originality which lies in "his awareness of the shape of contemporary England" (Alpakin, 1994, p.125), and in a bigger scale Europe, makes *1984* not only a must-read for the students of novelistic fiction, but a valuable "source of information for social historians" (ibid).

Taking after the gloomy political arena of Europe in 1930s and 40s, which was at the time dominated by Hitler's Germany, Franco's Spain, and Mussolini's Italy, Orwell in 1984, depicts a forlorn future in which the world is divided between three totalitarian regimes in which the ancient ambition of forcing a collective identity upon the individuals, and by doing so, disposing of any form of political dissension, has been pushed toits logical extremes. He masterfully utilizes this semi-cyberpunk plot to investigate this ongoing struggle between the individual and collective identity in modern era, a struggle which is bound to culminate in "the defeat of the individual" (Alpakin, 1994, p.125). It must be noted, however, that *1984* is not written in the spirit of a prediction, but in Orwell's own words, as "a show-up of the perversions to which a centralized economy is liable and which have already been partly realized in Communism and Fascism" (Crick, 1982, p. 569).

Orwell's Imagined totalitarian regime in Nineteen Eighty-Four which is called Oceania draws upon various resources and methods in order to sustain its grip over the masses of its population. It has classified society into three distinct classes, inner party, outer party, and the proles and set up a pyramidal power structure in which each class is controlled by the upper one, and the semi-divine emblematic leader, the Big Brother as the

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* I have used this term here because many governing regimes have totalitarian tendencies but what we encounter in *1984* is the complete realization of the concept.

apex who functions as the source of all power and legitimacy. To eradicate the unbalancing effects of a centralized economy which in a normal world cannot refrain from producing surplus value and is consequently condemned to end up in the accumulation of wealth and the inescapable change in the ruling order, all the three states in *1984* have devised a method of being engaged in a forever war which, on one hand, serves as psychological deterrent for people by keeping their focus on and directing their hatred towards an imaginary archenemy and on the other hand, balances the totalitarian economy by consuming the surplus value that might instigate a change. In Alpakin's words, the war, "eats up the surplus of consumable goods and helps to preserve the special mental atmosphere that a hierarchical society needs." (Alpakin, 1994, p.132) The vast implementation of the thought police and savage, yet innovative methods of torture also have a role to play in forcing the individuals to conform to the collective identity.

But though less conspicuously depicted, the greatest struggle between the totalitarian regime and the individuals is always fought in the domain of the discourse. A totalitarian regime can control the outer manifestations of an individual's behavior, but technically speaking, the inner thoughts and understandings of an individual is beyond the reach of such a regime through the conventional methods. The complete and unquestionable control, the kind of which is aspired by the totalitarian regime, requires the control of the individual's mind, his way of seeing the world, his totalizing discourse which gives meaning to his life experiences, and this can only be achieved if the regime can control the discourse, or in plain words, the language. It should always be remembered that all fights to overthrow a ruling power is first fought, lost and won, in the domain of totalizing discourse. Without a victory in the domain of discourse no sizable opposition force can be solidified in order to repudiate the legitimacy of the ruling power and then overthrow it. All revolutions start from a vision, which as will be discussed here, is in itself a linguistic phenomenon, and then spreads its influence to become the dominant discourse of the society. A battle lost in the domain of discourse is a lost cause. The examples of this discourse battles are redundant in history. In The Great French revolution in 1789, The October revolution of Russia in 1917, or in a more recent Islamic Revolution of Iran[†] in 1979, the defendants of the ruling power first lost the battle to control the dominant discourse; a development which was promptly followed by the downfall of the ruling regime.

The totalizing discourse, or the dominant ideology of a given society should be seen as an essentiallylinguistic phenomenon. That is so because the ideology gains shape and manifests itself only through a semiotic system that is called language, and thus, whoever controls the language, controls the ideology, and consequently the power structures of a given society. By devising the concept of Newspeak in 1984 Orwell manifests his profound awareness of the relationship between language and the power relations in society. His emphasis on the role of the language in giving shape to the power relations in his totalitarian society is predicated on the transformation in the concept of language that came about after the beginning decades of the 20th century and elevated language from a simple carrier of meaning to an active participant in the process of meaning formation. This transformation should be considered as a paradigm change with extensive

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[†] In the case of Iranian Revolution (1979), for instance, versions of leftist Islamism which were being formulated in the polemics of intellectual figures such as Ali Shariati gained massive popularity among literate classes of society and utterly overwhelmed the liberal ideology of the ruling class. This loss in the domain of the totalizing discourse was soon followed by the abolishing of the monarchy and the establishment of a new government system in Iran.

repercussions in various fields throughout the 20th century. Ernst Cassirer, in 1945, wrote: "in the whole history of science there is perhaps no more fascinating chapter than the rise of the new science of linguistics. In its importance it may very well be compared to the new science of Galileo which in the seventeenth century changed the whole concept of the physical world. (Cassirer, 2015, p. 1)

Taking an oversimplified vantage point which, though essentially reductionist and somehow crude, may still offer some enlightenment on the nature of this paradigm change, three distinct phases can be identified in the history of philosophy. Since its inception in Greece in 6th century BCE, philosophy was preoccupied with offering a unified theory of the outside world. This is what we can term *The Metaphysical Period*, which lasted up to Descartes's rationalist revolution in philosophy. The Cartesian breakthrough marked the beginning of the second phase, which can be roughly titled *The Epistemological Turn*, and which was basically the switching from the "What is the world?" question to a "How do we understand the world?" question. Such epistemological endeavors, in both Realist and Idealist camps entailed a considerable portion of the philosophical inquiries from the 16th to the 20th centuries. The beginning years of the 20th century and the rise of analytical philosophy, however, brings us to the third phase, which can be entitled *The Philosophy of Language*, or the study of that phenomenon which alone, or above all, makes the understanding of the world possible (Sluga, 1980, p. 1).

This transition towards the primacy of language in the conception of human experience can be traced in the works of many philosophical minds of the early 20th century. Friedrich Nietzsche in his *Will to Power* announced that we can only think within language and moving beyond language is equal to ceasing to think (1968, p. 266, 283). Ludwig Wittgenstein also focused on language as a dominant factor in human understanding of the world. His early work, *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus* was essentially an attempt to uncover the relationship between language and the world. In assigning to language the role of empowering humans with understanding, he went so far as to declare:"The limits of my language means the limits of my world" (1974, p. 68). Martin Heidegger, another widely influential German philosopher was following a similar path as well. As Babak Ahmadi outlines, "Heidegger theorized that we have been encircled by language, and language has no signification related to outer world. Reality is nothing but a word inside the language and humans have no way of moving outside language, and seeing it from outside." (1999, p. 134)

Another premise upon which the concept of the Newspeak is predicated is the subjective nature of reality, or our understanding of reality. Kant's epistemological conceptualizations, especially his theorem regarding the inaccessibility of the "thing as it is (*Ding an sich*)" to consciousness can be seen as the founding principle of defining reality as nothing but a subjective perception. To put it in plain language, we can have no direct contact, and therefore, no firsthand knowledge of the outside world. What we know is the reflection of the outside reality in our consciousness which ultimately takes the form of a linguistic sign. Thus, cognition is nothing but a linguistic phenomenon, and to take after Wittgenstein, the borders of language are the borders of our world, and whoever controls these borders, controls our grasp of reality, and subsequently our world. The concept of "doublethink" in 1984 which enables the individuals to accept two ostentatiously contradictory concepts as true at the same time, has been made possible by drawing upon and reiterating on this subjective nature of reality. In an objective sense two plus two

always equals four but if reality is nothing but a subjective construct two plus two can equal virtually anything. In Orwell's words, doublethink in itself is"to deny the existence of objective reality" (*Collected Essays*, 1968, p. 196, 270) in general.

Thus we come to see how language or, in a similar sense discourse,is the locus of ideology‡ and can be tampered with in order to affect the power relationships within a given society chiefly through imposing a certain world view upon the individualsand obliterating the possibility of comprehending alternative world views. This is why all ruling powers throughout the human history have tried to impose a form of control upon the discourse, and consequently protect their favorable power relations by imposing limitations on how language is practiced, by the censorship of undesirable linguistic productions, or by restricting forms of expression. Yet, it is only in Orwell's 1984 that we come across the most radical attempt to exert control on language, which is attempted by way of introducing the Newspeak. Orwell, as clear from his later remarks, has tried to "draw these ideas out to their logical consequences." (*collected Essays*,1968, p. 502)

The totalitarian regime of Oceania in 1984 is well aware of the subjective nature of reality which has been emphasized in the party's moto: "who controls the past, controls the future; who controls the present controls the past." (*1984*, 2018. p. 44, 313) O'Brien in the interrogation scene argues that past does not exist as a concrete entity anywhere in the world, but only in memories and records. Therefore, on one hand, the party takes hold of the records, and tampers with them continuously in order to adjust them to its progressively changing agenda of the party and on the other hand, the individuals are trained to control their memories and adjust them according to the party propaganda. The practicality of such an approach is highly questionable, of course, but having experienced the evil efficiency of the 20th century (partially) totalitarian regimes, one might find the overall effectiveness of these methods far beyond any reasonable doubt. If a ruling power acquires the technical possibility of tampering with and adjusting all the possible records, and the ideological determination to train the members of its society in a manner that they become unable or unwilling to practice their logical and linguistic competences, the catastrophic consequences, the kinds of which portrayed in 1984, would be very difficult to avoid. A quick look at the 20th century history will reveal how both of these techniques have indeed been practiced by totalitarian regimes by various degrees of success. In Russia, for example, majority of the original leaders of the revolution who were present in all the original photographs and reports were meticulously deleted out from the records after they were later convicted of treason, and the Russian people were persuaded decisively not to refer to them in any spoken or written communications. The very same happened after the 1979 Islamic revolution of Iran when the majority of the early leaders were banished from the public sphere upon being condemned to anti-revolutionary acts and their photos and even detailed historical records such as newspaper headlines were carefully photoshopped out. In fact, the totalitarian regimes of the 20[th]centiry such as Stalin's Russia, or Hitler's Germany came very close in the methods they use in order to solve the individuality of the members of the society in their favored collective identity.

Furthermore, past can only be present in language, or in the memory of the individuals which also works semioticly. Without language, or the semiotic system which governs our understanding of the world, no knowledge of the world is possible, and consequently no past or future can exist. Our ability to comprehend past and future is at its heart a linguistic ability, an ability which has resulted in the development of what we now call culture. So, if the party controls the language, even the individual's memory cannot escape from it. The Carnapian test

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‡ "To study ideology… is to study the way in which meaning (signification) serves to sustain relations of domination." (Thompson, 1984, p. 230)

of this huge claim is so simple: some hypothetical people with no past tense in their language will not be able to refer to their past, or remember a clear picture of what happened to them. Their vision of past will be limited to their immediate past as long as the feelings are alive. Only the syntactical anomaly of a past tense inside a language, in its various forms has empowered us to see and imagine the past events, although subjectively. The same is true of the future tense comparably.

Therefore, the party's ambition of controlling the past entails a bigger ambition of being able to control the language, and hence, the Newspeak is born. The party tries not only to obliterates the records of dissenters in order to avoid promoting them to the status of martyrs, but also to limit the linguistic competence in a much bigger scale; an enterprise which aims at nothing less than making the commitment of a thought crime an absolute impossibility. Obrien explains to Winston: "we do not allow the dead to rise up against us." ... "you must stop imagining that posterity will vindicate you. Winston, posterity will never hear of you. you will be lifted clean out from the stream of history. We shall turn you into gas and pour you into the stratosphere. nothing will remain of you, not a name in a register, not a memory in a living brain. you will be annihilated in the past as well as in the future. you will never have existed." (p. 320-321)But the more effective method will be the creation of the Newspeak, a language which will render the remembering or discussing the ideas of dissenters like Winston impossible.

Orwell have gone far enough to include an independent appendix on the principles of Newspeak in which he explicates the ingenious methods by which the party is trying to implement the Newspeak in order to obliterate or at least minimize the possibility of committing a thought crime. Like any other ideologically-loaded language one might think that Newspeak is devised in order to make the expression of a certain ideological worldview possible or at least easier, but as one reads through the novel, he or she finds out that this is not the case with this particular language. Newspeak is indeed not a human language per se, but an attempt to devoid the language of its potentiality for the creative assembling of the subjective reality. It is designed not only to force its users towards a special understanding of reality, but also make all other ways of comprehending reality impossible. Orwell explains this as plainly as one can wish for:

> The purpose of Newspeak was not only to provide a 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. It was intended that when Newspeak had been adopted once and for all and Oldspeak forgotten, a heretical thought — that is, a thought diverging from the principles of Ingsoc — should be literally unthinkable, at least so far as thought is dependent on words. Its vocabulary was so constructed as to give exact and often very subtle expression to every meaning that a Party member could properly wish to express, while excluding all other meanings and also the possibility of arriving at them by indirect methods. (*Collected Essays*, 1968, p. 376-377)

This is why the focus of "the enormous team of experts now engaged in compiling the Eleventh Edition of the Newspeak Dictionary" (p. 62)is not on the coinage of new words which make the linguistic articulation of new thoughts possible, but on the axing out of the already existing vocabulary and cutting them down to an absolutely-necessary minimum. (p. 377) Syme who is a philologist in the project, explains this peculiar characteristic of Newspeak to Winston: "You think, I dare say, that our chief job is inventing new words. But not a bit of it! We're destroying words—scores of them, hundreds of them, every day. We're cutting the language down to the bone."(p. 65) Orwell explains later that "the special function of certain

Newspeak words, of which OLDTHINK was one, was not so much to express meanings as to destroy them." (p. 383)Thus, contrary to conventional human languages which typically tend to grow in terms of their number of vocabularies, the Newspeak vocabulary grows progressively smaller as the time passes. Orwell notes that as long as the party's objectives are concerned "each reduction was a gain, since the smaller the area of choice, the smaller the temptation to take thought." (p. 388) All this attempt to reduce vocabulary is derived from the fundamental concept that was outlined above, that language is behind our understanding of both subjective and objective reality, and by limiting language, a ruling power can in a sense limit the reality.

Another aspect of using language which can pose a threat to a totalitarian power in the domain of discourse is its inherent feature of nurturing creativity among its users. The creativity involved in the usage of language arises out of the fact that language inescapably contains innumerable points of indeterminacy because it is inherently incapable of representing reality in its entirety. These points of indeterminacy which are rooted in both syntax and lexicon of any human language create ambiguities that ask for users' subjective mediation in order to make sense. Unlike classical aesthetics and romantic hermeneutics that in most cases consider these ambiguities as flaws that need to be avoided, we now know that these ambiguities, that arise out of the semantic and syntactic gaps and indeterminacies in the fabric of text function as opportunities for the users, utterers and audiences, to practice their creative imagination. As Eagleton (2013)puts it, "ambiguities can be enriching" (p. 17). Apparently, the practice of the creative powers has the potentiality of making the users of language diverge from the intended meaning and deviate from the strictly-acceptable dominant ideology. It can be said that, in a sense, the seeds of dissension are lain in the fabric of human languages, at least partially, in the inevitable ambiguity that they nurture. Newspeak counters this flaw that can pose a persistent danger to the dominant discourse, by trying to rigidly define all vocabularies down to their core denotations, and purge all ambiguities and shades of meaning out of them. (p. 378) This is why Newspeak favors simplicity, plainness, regularity and clarity in both its lexicon and syntax, and considers all forms of ambiguity and irregularity as instances of potentiality for thought crimes that need to be eradicated in the ideal form of the Newspeak.

The ultimate purpose of Newspeak is, in Orwell's words, to make a language that was "as nearly as possible independent of consciousness" (p. 388), in other words, to enable its users to communicate without being able to think. Extensive use of abbreviations in Newspeak should be seen in this context as an attempt to separate the words from their conscious and unconscious connotations and limit their semantic horizons to the intended scope. Orwell exemplifies by referring to communist jargon: "COMINTERN is a word that can be uttered almost without taking thought, whereas COMMUNIST INTERNATIONAL is a phrase over which one is obliged to linger at least momentarily." (p. 387) By impeding the connection between conscious experiences of individuals and the words that represent and give form to them, Newspeak aims at a sort of abstraction that is required to castrate language from its potentials of enabling the users to think outside the prescribed borders. Orwell's final dictum which is uttered by Syme is enlightening: "The Revolution will be complete when the language is perfect. Newspeak is Ingsoc and Ingsoc is Newspeak,' he added with a sort of mystical satisfaction. (p. 67)

A plethora of legitimate arguments can be raised about impossibility of Orwellian Newspeak, but this does not mean that various ruling powers throughout the human history have not ever tried to devise a possible version of it. All the resolute determinations to load the language with ideological sensations, all the efforts to devise better and more efficient methods of brainwashing and spreading propaganda, all the troubles of enforcing limitations

on the freedom of speech and expression, have always been in service of winning the war and decide once and for all who or what gets to dominate the discourse. We must all rejoice in the fact that perhaps due to technical insufficiency, or the flexible nature of language, no single totalitarian power in history has ever managed to invent a fully functional Newspeak and by doing so deprive us of our most extravagant means of freedom, our Language, but we must not rest assured that they will continue to fail in that enterprise forever.

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