Chapter 2

“Power Is Only a Word”: Language, Control, and the Orwellian Philosophy of Nineteen Eighty-Four

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ABSTRACT

This chapter aims to define and examine the role of language and political power as they appear in two of George Orwell’s most influential works: Nineteen Eighty-Four and the essay “Politics and the English Language.” These complimentary, though at times seemingly contradictory, works build a philosophy of language which sees the spoken and written word used as weapons for an authoritarian regime. By comparing Orwell’s essay and novel, as well as explaining their connection to the Whorfian theory of Linguistic Relativity, the author hopes to track the development of Nineteen Eighty-Four’s Newspeak as the ultimate language of control in a fictionalized world which seemed all too possible to its author.

INTRODUCTION

The history of politics is one which finds itself inextricably interlaced with language. Through countless documents and speeches, the words chosen and their order have influenced the course of policy and life for every strata of society. In the modern era of 24-hour news cycles and the ease of communication provided by the internet, this observation is especially true. Since World War II – an event which, through the notorious propaganda and Fascism of the National Socialist Party, has become synonymous with the political manipulation of an entire nation for the purposes

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of war and the commission of atrocities – the study of language and politics has found itself focused on the ways in which language can be exercised as an effective means of large-scale control. Of course, like any important philosophical debate, the relationship between politics and language has found itself the subject of literary works as well as works of nonfiction and academia. Chief among writers who have tackled the topic in fiction, George Orwell created the concept for an entire language rooted in the sort of fascist authoritarianism he witnessed as a journalist in the Second World War. The language, “Newspeak,” encapsulates the fundamental ability of language to control a population, molding and eliminating free thought. The construction of this fictional language stands as one of Orwell’s chief accomplishments, embodying the horror of the dystopian government explored in his novel *Nineteen Eighty-Four*. However, Newspeak becomes problematic as an application of Orwell’s linguistic philosophy when compared to his influential essay, “Politics and the English Language.” The shortcomings of, and dangers to, the English language which Orwell describes in his essay seem at odds with the language which he would shortly produce in his vision of the bleak, fascist future. This chapter seeks to explore Newspeak and Orwell’s philosophy of language in order to track the development of the author’s linguistic trajectory; to bring in line the theory present in “Politics and the English Language” (abbreviated: PEL) with Newspeak, the assumed action precipitated by that theory, ultimately grounding both in the Whorfian theory of Linguistic Relativity.

**BACKGROUND**

A search for “George Orwell” in scholarly databases will return an enormous number of articles, studies, and books on the life and works of the author. Indeed, many things have already been said about the two works which stand at the center of this chapter. *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, and Newspeak specifically, has fascinated linguistically minded scholars and spurred many attempts to classify the language, or at least make claims about the novel’s use of language: Paul Chilton (1984) categorized Newspeak as a *sublanguage* (p.135), Berel Lang (1989) likened Orwell’s use of language to the ultimate loss of humanity (p. 169), and Jean-Jacques Courtine (1986) insisted on Newspeak as a response to C.K. Ogden’s *Basic English* (p. 71). “Politics and the English Language” has largely seen itself discussed in the pages of pedagogical journals, its merit as an instructive tool in English Composition classrooms weighed and debated (Freedman 1981).

All of the works mentioned above examine, in one way or another, the impact of language on Orwell’s work. However, none truly attempt to define Orwell’s linguistic philosophy or place *Nineteen Eighty-Four* and “Politics and the English
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