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The Sapir-Whorf Hypothesis and Orwell:

Newspeak as a Linguistic Fallacy in *1984*

Language is the expression of thoughts in words. When used, it has the ability to transform nuanced ideas into a sequence of sounds and letters. It is a way in which we communicate. It is what makes us human. But does language have the ability to dictate thought? According to the theory of linguistic determinism, yes. Linguist Edward Sapir and his student Benjamin Whorf postulated that language and its structures prescribe human thought processes. This linguistic theory came to be known as the Sapir-Whorf hypothesis, or linguistic determinism. The language engineers of Ingsoc, the ideology that drives the oppressive totalitarian regime in *1984*, create the fictional language Newspeak assuming that this theory is true. Written in 1948 by George Orwell, the dystopian novel depicts a bleak future of omnipresent government surveillance, psychological manipulation, and absurd propaganda. The Party creates Newspeak to ensure the intellectual enslavement of its citizens. The Party sought to make thoughtcrime, the criminal act of holding beliefs that oppose Ingsoc, impossible by reducing vocabulary to the point at which unorthodox thoughts were “literally unthinkable” (Orwell *1984* 310). The novel itself is written in English, but the satirically academic appendix found at the end of the novel, deconstructs the fictitious language in great detail. Publishers demanded that Orwell cut the appendix in its entirety, deeming it unnecessary. Orwell refused, saying, “I couldn’t possibly agree to [it]… It would alter the whole colour of the book and leave out a good deal which is essential” (Orwell [17 March]). Many readers of *1984* overlook this appendix and thus miss the glaring satire, which is an essential part of Orwell’s vision. In the year the book is set, Newspeak is still provisional and not yet implemented as a sole means of communication leaving the future of Newspeak a mystery in *1984*; begging the question: will the Party triumph in eradicating thoughtcrime, or will free speech, and consequently, free thought, prove victorious? More importantly, does Orwell himself believe that language is an effective way to control humanity?

While Newspeak is often interpreted as Orwell’s attempt to create the ultimate means of psychological oppression, a closer look reveals Newspeak’s inherent flaws that suggest it was not Orwell’s intention for Newspeak to be perfect. As literary critic Roger Fowler frankly states, “Newspeak is a fallacy, and Orwell knows it” (Fowler). In his essay, “Newspeak and the Language of the Party,” Fowler argues that Orwell creates the fictional language to satirize linguistic determinism. Fowler also cites the Newspeak appendix as evidence that Orwell never meant the language to be taken seriously. Alternatively, Jem Berkes argues that Newspeak is the “ultimate weapon” against human consciousness. He claims Newspeak and Ingsoc’s media to be strongest tool of manipulation in the entire book. While scholar Kristen Fairchild recognizes Newspeak’s flaws, she fails to separate Orwell from Newspeak’s fictional creators. Thus, Fairchild argues that Orwell, himself, “designs Newspeak under the assumption that linguistic determinism is a real phenomenon” (Fairchild). Her interpretation stems from the assumption that Newspeak and its structures reflect Orwell’s own opinions towards language as a means of thought control. Following this same logic, the argument could be made that Orwell endorsed all of Ingsoc’s philosophies, but an outspoken activist for democracy obviously did not create a fictional oppressive totalitarian government to mirror his own views. What none of these critics acknowledge is that Newspeak’s failure suggests a victory of free-speech. While Newspeak is conventionally seen as the ultimate political tool, the language's inability to control thought, combined with the past-tense and satirical appendix reveals a hidden glimpse of hope in the otherwise bleak dystopia. Through both the systemic flaws of Newspeak and the satirical nature of its accompanying appendix, Orwell presents Newspeak as the failed dream of an overconfident party, which creates the language with a presumptuous faith in linguistic determinism and lack thereof in human resilience. Newspeak’s failure, which in turn suggests the defeat of the Party, reveals a somewhat optimistic reading of *1984*, reflecting Orwell's own perceptions of the limits of language.

The B vocabulary consists of words with ideologically polarized meanings created by the Party for political purposes. The B vocabulary’s reliance on metaphors grounded in Oldspeak jeopardizes the Party’s aims to objective all meaning, revealing that Newspeak has systemic flaws that could cause the language to unravel. Words like *bellyfeel*, *blackwhite*, *duckspeak*, and *ownlife* require an understanding of the symbolic concepts they refer to. The word *prolefeed* refers to the crude content released by the Pornosec department to entertain the proles. To a Newspeak speaker, *prolefeed* literally means “food for proles,” but the proles are obviously not eating pornography. What is missing is the idea of consumption as ingesting information required to fully grasp the meaning of the word. This metaphorical understanding of consumption exists only in modern English; thus, practitioners of Newspeak are unaware of the literal usage, and hence, the meaning, of the words they speak. While this is not a problem at the time the book is set, future generations of Newspeak speakers will be unable to understand their language without the knowledge of Oldspeak concepts fundamental to Newspeak. One might argue that understanding would be moot at this point, but absolute ideological manipulation, which was the Party’s goal, is impossible without the regulation of meaning. Fairchild concludes, “[T]he disruption of metaphors prevalent from the older form of English has the greatest potential to undermine Newspeak because they are only a manifestation of the enduring conceptual foundations of perception” (Fairchild). Because Party members have such limited perspectives, they are unable to grasp the meaning of phrases conceived in times of greater intellectual freedom. Language reflects the level of free thought at the time it is created; therefore, it also reflects the politics and culture of that time as well. An example of this is the Newspeak word *ownlife*, “meaning individualism and eccentricity” (Orwell *1984* 84). *Oldspeak* is the manifestation of a democratic concept from another time. The irony lies in the fact that Newspeak Engineers have created a word to describe a concept that The Party seeks to eradicate. Vocabulary serves as a vessel to convey meaning. So, although “individualism and eccentricity” might not exist in the oppressive world of Big Brother, because *ownlife* is a part of the Newspeak vocabulary, the idea can still be conceptualized by Party members. Despite not knowing what freedom feels like, citizens just knowing what freedom is could prove fatal to the Party’s vision. Because remnants of the English language remain, remnants the free world remain as well, and Newspeak is never able to escape its Oldspeak roots.

Similar to Newspeak’s inability to function independently, another systemic fault lies in the Party’s attempt to control the perceptions of its citizens. Newspeak’s infeasibility is further demonstrated by the impossibility of doublethink, which requires the user to abdicate objective reality and to subscribe to the Party’s solipsistic version of the world. In *1984*, doublethink is the act of holding two contradictory thoughts as true, requiring subjects to be both conscious and unconscious simultaneously. It is an inherently paradoxical concept that the Party depends on to justify ironic slogans like, “WAR IS PEACE” and “FREEDOM IS SLAVERY” (Orwell *1984* 4). The majority of political Newspeak words and phrases necessary to uphold Ingsoc are unintelligible without doublethink, making it impossible for the language to function independently in the way that the Party wants it to. Early in the novel, Orwell establishes that Winston is unable to accept the Party's lies as truths, and consequently is unable practice doublethink. Winston’s job at the ironically named Ministry of Truth constantly exposes him to Party deceit as he effectively changes history to ensure the credibility of Big Brother. One of his tasks is to delete an unfulfilled governmental pledge: “The Ministry of Plenty has issued a promise…that there would be no ration during 1984. Actually, as Winston was aware, the chocolate ration was to be reduced from thirty grams to twenty at the end of the present week” (Orwell *1984* 40). By directly following the Party’s promise with a sentence expressing its futility, Orwell mirrors the constant switching between truth and falsehood involved in doublethink. This quote also reveals Winston’s “aware[ness],” which ultimately makes him a threat to the Party. Winston’s inability to practice doublethink successfully suggests that it cannot function as a perception system. The concept of doublethink stems from solipsism, the belief that nothing exists outside the mind. In theory, doublethink rejects objective reality through the manipulation of subjective reality. O'Brien's conversations with Winston at the Ministry of Love show the Party's confidence in subjective reality and disregard of objective reality. O’Brien says, “We control matter because we control the mind” (Orwell *1984* 274). Orwell describes the Party’s philosophy of ideological manipulation in the simple terms of “mind over matter,” “matter” symbolizing objective reality and subsequently “the mind” referring to the subjective reality that the Party sought to control. The Inner Party believes that through its manipulation of subjective reality, it can control objective reality; Winston has trouble grappling with this concept. His appreciation for various objects, such as a coral paperweight or the creamy white pages in his journal he finds in a junk shop, show Winston's irrepressible grounding in objective reality. Orwell shares this appreciation of physical objects with Winston. In this way, Winston’s inability to accept the notion that objective reality holds no value, reflects some of Orwell’s personal beliefs. In his essay “Why I Write,” Orwell wrote, “So long as I remain alive and well I shall continue… to love the surface of the earth, and to take pleasure in solid objects” (Orwell “Why I Write”). Orwell’s love of “solid objects” and “the surface of the earth” reveals that he has an appreciation for the physical things around him. Orwell’s objective grounding might suggest that he does not believe the mind can completely reject an objective understanding of the world. However, the paradox of doublethink lies in the fact that Orwell describes it as an active process, meaning that practitioners must be aware of their objective reality to be able to suppress it. Orwell describes the act of performing doublethink as “consciously to induce unconsciousness, and then, once again, to become unconscious of the act of hypnosis you had just performed.” (Orwell *1984* 36). “[T]he act of hypnosis” (doublethink) is the action of “you,” meaning that “you” are actively practicing doublethink. Orwell uses the active voice to assert that although the process of doublethink results in a passive subject, it requires the subject to be active to initiate the process. The very process of using consciousness to inflict unconsciousness is a paradox, and thus doublethink is impossible. Without doublethink providing meaning to their language, the Newspeak engineers will never succeed in removing thoughtcrime from the citizens of Oceania.

Not only is the Party’s concept of doublethink flawed, the Party fails to control the thoughts of its citizens. The descriptions of Newspeak speakers as simply uttering meaningless streams of orthodox jargon reveals that these speakers are not consciously thinking about what they are saying and are therefore unaware of the nature of the propaganda they are thrusting upon the masses; thus, speaking Newspeak generally does not involve critical thought. *Duckspeak*, meaning “to quack like a duck” (Orwell *1984* 56), is a Newspeak term that describes the monotonous and formulaic speech of devout Party members. While in the canteen, Winston and his friend Syme observe a conversation between a man and a young woman, both of whom are easily identified as blind adherents to Ingsoc ideology. Winston notices, “[the man’s] voice never stopped for even an instant, even when the girl was speaking” (Orwell *1984* 55). The man’s unbroken speech reveals that he is unaware of the fact that his conversation counterpart is speaking as well. This lack of awareness shows that he is not actively thinking about his surroundings. Orwell continues to characterize this speaker, “[He] not a real human being but some kind of dummy. It was not the man’s brain that was speaking; it was his larynx” (Orwell *1984* 56). By describing him as “not a real human being,” but “some kind of dummy,” Orwell dehumanizes this speaker. The word “larynx,” indicates that the sounds being spewed from the speaker’s mouth are not coming from his brain. The mental detachment from the action of speaking reveals that Newspeak does not actually force speakers to engage in orthodox thought, rather the words are spoken without consideration. Orwell also demonstrates this through the monotony and diction of Newspeak dialogue. A compelling example is clear during a scene depicting Hate Week, the week-long demonization of the enemies of the state. While an orator is speaking, he is suddenly interrupted, and told the news that Oceania is no longer at war with Eurasia, but now at war with Eastasia:

a messenger hurried onto the platform and a scrap of paper was slipped into the speaker’s hand. He unrolled and read it without pausing in his speech. Nothing altered in his voice or manner, or in the content of what he was saying, but suddenly the names were different… The thing that impressed Winston in looking back was that the speaker had switched from one line to the other actually in mid-sentence, not only without a pause, but without even breaking the syntax. (Orwell *1984* 185-186)

The orator does not react to the massive news he has just received. In fact, he continues speaking “without even breaking the syntax.” There is no alteration “in [the orator’s] voice or manner” or even in, “the content of what he [is] saying,” characterizing this type of speech as automated, formulaic, and autogenetic. The content of the orator’s speech does not matter. Rather, “his utterances are just an orthodox gesture and in no sense an account of a real state of affairs” (Fowler). Fowler explains that the orator “is in no sense choosing words in relation to intended meanings… Thus, language neither springs from consciousness (the speaker is not thinking), nor has any relation to truth” (Fowler). Following this logic, Newspeak can reduce the speaker's level of sensibility, but it cannot induce orthodox thought. This fatal flaw uproots the entire purpose of Newspeak: the ability to control the thoughts of its citizens.

Newspeak’s failure is demonstrated not only by its systemic flaws but also by its infectiveness, as Orwell shows throughout the main narrative of *1984*. Despite being constantly surrounded by Newspeak, Julia and Winston think and act as thoughtcriminals. Their sexual relationship demonstrates that Newspeak has not succeeded in purging all of its citizens of unorthodox thought. Although in the year 1984 Newspeak is not yet used to communicate, it is still a constant presence in Party members’ lives. Newspeak is found in Party slogans, articles in the *Times*, and news broadcasts. Berkes argues that it is “the Party-controlled media in the novel that expertly uses Newspeak as well as other linguistic trickery to spread its propaganda and brainwash the public” (Berkes). While the media certainly does play a role in shaping the perceptions of Party citizens, Julia and Winston illustrate the limits of its influence. Their relationship begins when Julia gives Winston a note saying, “*I love you.*” (Orwell *1984* 110). This action characterizes Julia as a risk taker and foreshadows her role as the dominant partner in the relationship. The two escape London and meet in “the golden country,” a metaphorical garden of Eden. While there, Winston asks Julia if she has had sex before, to which she responds, “hundreds of times” (Orwell *1984* 127). Julia’s “hundreds” of sexual experiences reveal that she regularly commits sexcrime despite being immersed in and a disseminator of Ingsoc propaganda masquerading as a member of the Junior Anti-Sex League. Contrary to Berkes’ belief, Julia is not brainwashed. In fact, she expresses her resentment towards the Party through her sexuality. When they do have sex, Orwell describes it as something with inherent ideological and political motives: “Their embrace had been a battle, the climax a victory. It was a blow struck against the Party. It was a political act” (Orwell *1984* 119). Orwell uses phrases like "a blow struck against the Party,” “political act,” and “victory” to describe Julia and Winston’s intimacy in terms of political dissonance. By dubbing their intercourse “a political act,” Orwell presents Julia and Winston’s sexual relationship as having revolutionary motives and power. As shown by Winston and Julia, Newspeak and the media do not have the power override natural human impulses or stifle independent thought.

In addition to his relationship with Julia, Winston’s thoughts reveal a great deal about his mental resilience. Winston’s continuous and deliberate engagement in thoughtcrime reveals that Newspeak has little-to-no effect on his ability to think freely and dangerously. Not until Winston is tortured in Ministry of Truth does he accept the Party’s propaganda as true; thus his conversion is because of emotional torture, not language. In need of an outlet to express his thoughts, Winston’s first rebellious is to start a diary. Winston knows that if caught, he could serve up to twenty-five years at a forced labor camp or even be killed. Orwell describes this critical moment as “the decisive act” (Orwell *1984* 7). Winston is aware that by marking the paper he is, in effect, signing a death sentence, as writing his thoughts in ink provides physical evidence of thoughtcrime. Even more damning, Winston scribbles “DOWN WITH BIG BROTHER” (Orwell *1984* 19) over and over again, reflecting his hatred towards the Party. Before he is caught by the thoughtpolice and brought to the Ministry of Love, Winston has a remarkably active mind: He often ponders the nature of his reality and tries to reconnect with the past. But after spending a significant time incarcerated, the effects of Winston’s psychological torture are striking: "He began to write down the thoughts that came into his head… ‘FREEDOM IS SLAVERY.' Then almost without a pause, he wrote ‘TWO AND TWO MAKE FIVE.’” (Orwell *1984* 287). Now, instead of denouncing Big Brother, Winston is scribbling Party slogans. This critical shift occurs after Winston undergoes extreme physical and psychological torture, indicating that this is what cracks formerly free-thinking Winston. Furthermore, Winston goes from one phrase to the next “almost without a pause,” reflecting the tone and rapidity of Newspeak speakers like the orator during Hate Week. The climax of the novel is Winston’s permanent conversion into a Party sheep. A cage of rats is placed in front of his face, and paralyzed by fear, he chooses Julia to take his place. By betraying Julia to save himself, Winston loses the last aspect of his humanity. Through Winston’s conversion Orwell asserts that the Party is capable of controlling a population. But language alone cannot.

After foreshowing the language’s failure in the novel, Orwell finally reveals Newspeak’s defeat in the appendix. The usage of past-tense verbs and modern English words, along with the appendix’s satirical tenor, suggests the ultimate doom of Newspeak and victory of free-speech. Even before encountering the Newspeak appendix, readers are already exposed to the language and its usage in the novel by Syme’s descriptions of the language and descriptions of Newspeak diction. The appendix breaks down Newspeak and analyzes each and every aspect of the language. The first few lines of the appendix provide a taste of the style and tone used throughout the rest of the appendix:

Newspeak was the official language of Oceania and had been devised to meet the ideological needs of Ingsoc, or English Socialism. In the year 1984, there was not as yet anyone who used language as his sole means of communication, either in speech or writing. The leading articles in the *Times* were written in it, but this was a tour de force which could only be carried out by a specialist. It was expected that Newspeak would have finally superseded Oldspeak (or Standard English, as we should call it) by about the year 2050. (Orwell *1984* 309)

This objective, academic, and expository language is found nowhere else in the book. Fowler states, “this style has no affinity to the more excitable and fragmentary thoughts and speech of the main focaliser Winston, nor to the demotic rhetoric of Orwell himself, as found in his passionately critical essays.” (Fowler). The fact that this style is unique to the appendix supports the claim that Orwell intended its use for something else entirely. The mimicry of scholarly language and pseudo-academic analyses of all aspects of the language evokes the sense of satire. What is possibly most striking is Orwell’s use of past-tense when referring to Newspeak or the Party: “Newspeak *was* the official language of Oceania.” This “was,” in effect, negates all 300 of the pages preceding it. However, Orwell did not write *1984* with such a profound message to have one word discount it; the appendix instead serves as a satire of the Party’s faith in linguistic determinism. Phrases like “had been,” “it was expected,” and “would have” are all indefinite and reduce the Party’s ambitious project to a mere past event. In a sense, Orwell mocks the Party by reducing Newspeak to a futile blip in history. The appendix is also written by a narrator who speaks and understands modern English. Orwell asserts this when narrator equates Oldspeak to “Standard English,” and uses the collective pronoun “we” to refer to a group of English-speaking people which included themselves. The failure of Newspeak and victory of free speech underscores the idea that Orwell did not see language as a sufficient means of thought control. While *1984* explores the many sinister ways in which a political system can control its population, it is up to the reader to interpret which ones are more successful. All Orwell reveals is that Oceania is a part of distant and impersonal history through “The Principles of Newspeak.” The one thing Orwell makes certain of with Oceania's mysterious collapse is that human nature will prevail.

Newspeakis the exploration of an idea: What happens when language is used as a political tool? This is not a rhetorical question; language has very real implications in the politics of both Orwell’s day and our current age. In his essay “Politics and the English Language,” Orwell passionately criticized political rhetoric for lacking any real inherent meaning, and for insidiously disguising underlying motives. Today, the concept of political correctness requires leaders to adjust their language to avoid offending certain groups or members of society. U.S. President Donald Trump is an outspoken critic of politically correct speech, claiming that it hinders the substance of his words. According to linguists, Trump speaks at the same level of complexity as a nine-year-old. This is very clear on Trump’s Twitter account, where he does the majority of his communication. Twitter is a platform designed for casual bite-sized bits of information that can be contained within a 280-character limit. However, when formally speaking, there is no alteration in Trump’s language from that which he uses on Twitter. In an interview for MSNBC, John McWhorter, a professor of linguistics at Columbia University states, “Often the content of what [Trump is] saying is slimmer than the bulk—the bulkage, of the verbiage that he spews out.” But the “verbiage” of Trump is rudimentary in comparison to the pompous language of the Twentieth-Century nobility Orwell was at odds with. Trump is the product of an informal era. Linguists have found that with a formal speaking voice comes a heightened respect for the truth and for the validity of what you are saying. Because Trump’s language never leaves the realm of casual, he feels comfortable lying and dismissing the facts as “fake news.” Trump is not just obscuring the truth, he is rejecting it entirely. Trump is the manifestation of Orwellian logophobia we never saw coming. While Orwell critiqued the grandiose and pedantic dialect of the British elite, Trump is distorting fact from fiction at a fourth-grade level. Orwell’s fears of misrepresentation through language can manifest in strange ways.

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I uphold the NCS honor code, *Katie Ambrose.*