2049521

English 371

A: Politics and the English Language

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Orwell’s argument contains a mix of ideas that are supported by what we’ve learned in HEL and ideas that are refuted by what we’ve learned in HEL. He recognizes that language changes and mentions the well-supported argument that intentional language reforms are often unsuccessful, yet he still displays the same idealism in thinking that his suggestions will convince people to change their language as did the prescriptivists in their attempts at ascertainment. Some of his arguments against patterns he sees in English are good (e.g., Sapir-Whorf hypothesis, doublespeak, euphemism), and others (such as the “pretentious diction” section) sound like prescriptivists we learned about in HEL who were quickly drowned out by the rising tide that is the change in the English language. He did make reference to some of these failed attempts but seems to think his approach is different. Also, some of the things he said echoed sentiments I saw in my research on gender neutral language.

Language changes constantly and intentional reform efforts often fail. Orwell himself recognizes this and makes reference to several less-than-successful attempts at language reform. Orwell’s approach is not “archaism” or “salvaging of obsolete words and turns of speech”. It is not “the setting up of a “standard English” which must never be departed from”. This refers to “ascertainment” attempts in the 18th century by prescriptivists like Dryden, Swift, and Johnson. They had their own ideas about what English was correct (grammar, vocabulary, spelling, etc.) and tried to enforce that standard through articles, dictionaries, etc. There were even suggestions to create an English Academy for enforcing such rules, as in France and Italy. However, these proposals were not very successful because people like their freedom and want to have their own control over language. Even Johnson realized that trying to “fix” the English language to a certain standard would be unsuccessful (because language is constantly changing) and said as much in the preface to his 1755 dictionary, after which such attempts at ascertainment died down significantly. Orwell notes that he is not concerned with correcting grammar and syntax. He is also not concerned with “the avoidance of Americanisms”. As soon as Americanisms (American uses of vocabulary, grammar, etc. that differ from British English) first started appearing, they were seen primarily as corruptions of the English language and the various writings that mentioned them (such as Samuel Johnson’s dictionary in 1755 and John Pickering’s dictionary in 1816) deferred to the British usage as the “correct” usage. John Bartlett’s dictionary of Americanisms, published in 1848 with an expanded second edition published in 1859, was more neutral, interested in dialect for its own sake and speculating that perhaps America would develop its own style of language with its own merit. The real turning point, however, came in 1866 when James Russell Lowell published *The Biglow Papers* and included an introduction that provided extensive evidence that most Americanisms are, in fact, British archaisms; i.e., it was the British who changed to different language, not the Americans. This defence of Americanisms caused the criticism of them to subside. Orwell is also not interested in “good prose style”, or “fake simplicity and the attempt to make written English colloquial”. He also says his approach does not “imply in every case preferring the Saxon word to the Latin word”, which is likely a reference to complaints against aureate diction. However, his section on pretentious diction seems to contradict that statement of Orwell’s (see later in the essay).

Orwell says things that fit in with the Sapir-Whorf hypothesis. “The slovenliness of our language makes it easier for us to have foolish thoughts.” Unclear language leads to unclear thoughts. He also argues that when we use prefabricated phrases, we don’t have to think about language, so we don’t have to think about our meaning either; lack of thought about language leads to lack of thought in general. “throwing your mind open and letting the ready-made phrases come crowding in. They will construct your sentences for you-- even think your thoughts for you, to a certain extent-- and at need they will perform the important service of partially concealing your meaning even from yourself.”

Orwell talks about doublespeak and euphemism, both of which we learned about in class. In the pretentious diction section, he talks about words “used to dignify the sordid process of international politics” and how “writing that aims at glorifying war usually takes on an archaic color”. Both of these fit into the category of euphemism: language used to make something unpleasant more palatable. In the meaningless words section, Orwell talks about words like *facism*, *democracy*, *freedom* that “are often used in a consciously dishonest way” - the speaker has their own private definition but allows the listener to think the speaker means something else. This intentional obfuscation of meaning is doublespeak. In the handout we got about doublespeak, one of the indicators was “ambiguous symbols that allow for a wide range of interpretation”.

Orwell has some good arguments about why to change language. The section on dying metaphors talks about how dying metaphors have lost their vivid imagery and in some cases have even lost their meaning. He also says that this loss of meaning can be seen in mixed metaphors. These are good reasons to try to replace dying metaphors with fresher metaphors. He also makes a good point that operators or verbal false limbs are often excessively wordy; i.e., they don’t add any additional meaning and thus it takes the reader longer to read and understand the message.

Other arguments of Orwell sound more like the failed prescriptivist efforts of the past. In particular, his section on “pretentious diction” seemed eerily similar to previous complaints. There were complaints against “aureate diction” in the Middle Ages, which was the excessive introduction of Latin words, particularly for ornamentation or to sound fancier. This sounds very similar to Orwell’s claim that bad writers “are nearly always haunted by the notion that Latin or Greek words are grander than Saxon ones”. There were also complaints against “inkhorn terms”; i.e., foreign borrowings. However, many of those inkhorn terms were adopted into the English language, and some of the words Orwell complained about are in common usage today. For example, *element*, *objective*, *basic*, *historic*, *sword*, *banner*, *status quo*, *deus ex machina*, *predict*. I also thought it was interesting that Orwell complained about forming words using affixes given that this way of forming words is quite typical in English and has been for a while. It’s also not that different from the self-explaining compounds that go back all the way to Old English: multiple units of meaning are combined to make a new word. Additionally, the most common way of forming a word in English besides combining morphemes would be borrowing from another language, which Orwell also doesn’t want us to do. So I’m not sure how he expects us to form new words, unless perhaps he genuinely thinks that English already has all the words we could ever need (which would be a false assumption; the world is constantly changing and we often come across new objects and concepts that we must create words for). Orwell also talks about “scrapping of every word or idiom which has outworn its usefulness”, despite the fact that most attempts at eliminating undesired words or phrases are unsuccessful. Words die when it is their time, either through a collective decision by the people or by a mere fading out as they are replaced by better options, not when some overzealous prescriptivist tries to shoot them down.

Some of the things Orwell said echoed sentiments I saw in my research on gender neutral language. For example, he talked about the negative effects of careless language promoting careless thought. In *Words and Women*, Miller and Swift wrote “When sexist language is deliberate, writer and speakers have a rich store of words to choose from. More often sexist language is not deliberate: it is either subconscious or lazy. It is easier to talk about all doctors and hospital patients as he and all nurses as she. Much easier to accept the masculine/feminine stereotypes than to think them through in relation to real people” (Miller & Swift). Orwell also said to “let the meaning choose the word”. That quote was the title of a whole chapter in *Words and Women*, indicating Swift and Miller also appreciated the importance of thinking about meaning before deciding which word to use.

Thus while Orwell has valid concerns and makes some good arguments (some of which are backed up by what we have learned in HEL), he fails to recognize that intentional attempts at language reform, especially of language people are very accustomed to using, are rarely successful.

Works Cited

Miller, Casey, and Kate Swift. *Words and Women*. Penguin, 1979.

Orwell, George. “Politics and the English Language.” (1946) The Broadview Anthology of Expository Prose. Toronto: Broadview Press, 2011.