

1. Politics and the English Language - George Orwell

Politics and the English Language

'Politics and the English Language' (1946) is one of the best-known essays written by George Orwell. As its title suggests, Orwell identifies a link between the degraded English language of his time and the worsening political situation. Orwell sees modern discourse (especially political dialogue) as being less a matter of words chosen for their clear meanings than a series of stock phrases slung together.

Orwell begins by drawing attention to the strong link between the language writers use and the quality of political thought in the contemporary age (i.e. the 1940s). He argues that if we use language that is careless and decadent/ inferior, it makes it easier for us to fall into bad habits of thought, because language and thought are so closely linked.

Orwell then gives five examples of what he considers bad political writing. He draws attention to two faults which all five passages share: staleness of imagery (using stereotypes of stock phrases) and lack of precision (not being direct or clear). Most writers of these passages had a clear meaning couldn't either express clearly, or didn't care whether they communicated any particular meaning at all, and were simply saying things for the sake of speaking.

Orwell writes that this is a common problem in current political writing: 'prose consists less and less of words chosen for the sake of their meaning, and more and more of phrases stacked together like a premade hen-house.'

Next, Orwell elaborates on the key faults of modern English prose, namely:

Dying Metaphors: these are figures of speech which writers lazily reach for, even though such phrases are worn-out and can no longer convey a vivid image. Orwell cites a number of examples, including toe the line (meeting following a rule), Achilles' heel (w

One's biggest weakness), etc. Orwell's objection to such dying metaphors is that writers use them without even thinking about what the phrases actually mean, or when they mix their metaphors, again, because they're not interested in what those images evoke.

Operators or Verbal False Limbs: this is when a longer and rather vague phrase is used in place of a single-word (and more direct) verb, e.g. make contact with someone, which essentially means 'contact' someone. The passive voice of this phrase causes confusion.

Sentences are saved from fizzling out (because the thought or idea being conveyed is not particularly striking) by largely meaningless closing platitudes such as greatly to be desired or brought to a satisfactory conclusion.

Pretentious Diction: Orwell draws attention to several areas here. He states that words like objective, basis, and eliminate are used by writers to dress up simple statements, making subjective opinion sound like scientific fact.

Adjectives like epic, historic, and inevitable are used about international politics, while writing that glorifies war is full of old-fashioned words like realm, throne, and sword. Foreign words and phrases are used to convey an air of culture and elegance. Orwell mentions Latinate words like expedite and ameliorate which are preferred to regular English diction. All of these

examples are further proof of the 'slovenliness and vagueness' which Orwell detects in modern political prose.

Meaningless Words: Orwell argues that much art criticism and literary criticism in particular is full of words which don't really mean anything at all, e.g. human, living, or romantic.

Orwell argues that just as thought corrupts language, language can corrupt thought, with these ready-made phrases preventing writers from expressing anything meaningful or original. He believes that we should get rid of any word which has outworn its usefulness and should aim to use 'the fewest and shortest words that will cover one's meaning'. Writers should let the meaning choose the word, rather than vice versa.

We should think carefully about what we want to say until we have the right mental pictures to convey that thought in the clearest language.

Orwell concludes 'Politics and the English Language' with six rules for the writer to follow:

Never use a figure of speech in prose

Don't use long words instead of short ones.

If it is possible to eliminate a word, do it.

Prefer active to passive usages

Never use a foreign phrase, a scientific word or a jargon word if you can think of a regular equivalent.

Break any of these rules before saying anything pretentious/ to impress.

Additionally, Orwell presents a list of corrupting habits that cause writers to think poorly which results in poor writing. The list includes unoriginal or mixed metaphors, pretentious diction, and abstract or meaningless language.

When a person becomes lazy they allow their language to think for them. In this way, political writers end up following a party line. By using set phrases, they copy ideology without thinking. Independent thinking is necessary for a healthy political life.

As corrupted language chokes/kills independent/original thinking, it thus serves a political purpose. Orwell demonstrates the deceptive effect of various political terms, showing how elevated, complex and abstract language actively disguises ugly and violent concrete realities. In this way, abstract language becomes a means for political writers to justify the unjustifiable.

He presents a list of tools that can be used to resist dishonest language. Orwell sees the use of honest language as political act in itself, it is a form of resistance/rebellion against dangerous manipulations of rhetorical structures. He says that in an atmosphere of "terrible politics", corrupted language is almost inescapable. But this doesn't make the resistance against it useless. He returns to the claim that he opens with: that language is a tool, and not a natural evolutionary growth. It is thus possible to manipulate that tool. It does however, take consistent, conscious effort on the part of the political writer or speaker. Orwell thinks that mindless and deceptive language can be identified and resisted through ridicule, and, most of all, through a commitment to honest representation.

2. How I became a public speaker - George Bernard Shaw

George Bernard Shaw is one of the most thought-provoking writers of the twentieth century. Shaw was not only a great dramatist but also a great speaker and debater. In 1925 he was awarded the Nobel Prize for Literature. In this autobiographical essay "How I became a public speaker", Shaw gives us a humorous account of how he trained himself to become a good speaker.

Shaw went to the Zetetical meeting with his friend Lecky. He never spoke in public and he did not know anything about public meetings or their order. But he thought that he knew everything and he was proud of himself. Actually he was cowardly and nervous. He spoke something foolish in the debate and was ashamed of himself. So he decided to join the society and become a good speaker.

In the third meeting, Shaw was asked to take the chair and he consented. He read many books of great writers such as Stuart Mill, Darwin and George Eliot; and prepared notes. He attended every meeting. He spoke in the streets, in the parks, anywhere and everywhere possible. At all these meetings, Shaw took part in debates and his excessive nervousness disappeared.

He became a socialist orator. His first lecture was called "Thieves" and he spoke extempore.

Shaw never took payment for speaking. The Sunday Societies paid him ten guineas fee on a condition that he should not speak on controversial politics and religion. But Shaw said that he would talk only on controversial politics and religion and he didn't want any fee except his third class railway ticket. On this condition Shaw was allowed to speak on controversial politics and religion. Thus Shaw obtained freedom of speech.

His public speaking brought him a very necessary qualification for political work. They are the committee habit and platform technique. Once in St. James' Hall, London at a meeting, Shaw's opponent tried to defeat him. Shaw used his platform technique to defeat his opponent. Shaw made a speech. In the speech Shaw laughed at his opponent. Suddenly the opponent rushed to the platform to answer Shaw. But his followers had thought that their leader was going to attack Shaw. So they all rushed to the platform and they broke up the meeting. Again the meeting was reorganized and the opponent was made the chairman and Shaw became the speaker again. Thus Shaw succeeded in defeating his opponents. On another occasion Shaw defeated H.G. Wells in a famous debate.

Shaw used every opportunity to sharpen his skills, thereby becoming a reputable speaker and mastered the art of extempore speaking, this helped him cement his future career in politics. He is remembered to date for his comprehensive thoughts, political contributions and writings.