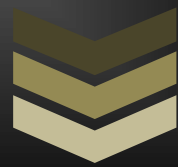


# ORWELL'S 'POLITICS AND THE ENGLISH LANGUAGE'

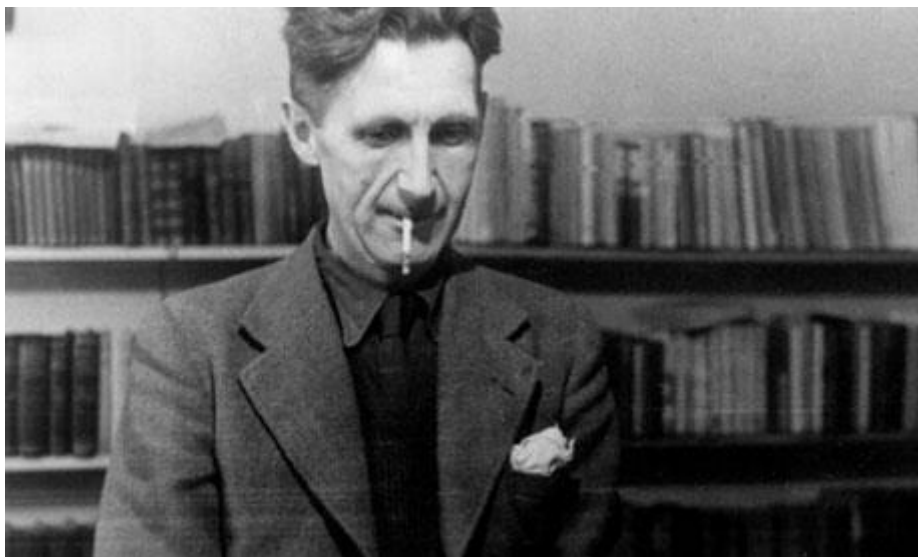


George Orwell's famous essay 'Politics and the English Language' raises issues around the connections between thinking, writing, style, language use and citizenship.

**Carl Tighe**

Often as writers we are concerned with representation in writing. That is, with how we use language - speech, reading and writing - to represent, understand, discuss or interpret our world. George Orwell's famous essay, 'Politics and the English Language', looks at several of the ideas implicit in this connection. His essay, in the manner of the ancient Greeks, raises issues around the connections between thinking, writing, style, language use and citizenship. He looks at the way we write, the way we represent our ideas and our thinking. He asks what political responsibilities *writers* have, how are these responsibilities discharged and is it ever possible for writers to be non-political? The essay is about the relationship between writing style and the writer's personal beliefs, their ability to think clearly and write honestly; that is, with the way they see and represent the world in writing.

Orwell's essay is *essential* reading for all writers.



'Politics and the English Language' first appeared in a magazine called *Horizon* in April 1946. This was at a time of great hardship, when the daunting task of rebuilding Europe after the Second World War had just started. It was also a time when people were beginning to grapple with what had happened to the German language under the Nazis and the Russian language under Stalin during the war. Orwell was particularly sensitive to political manipulation and he was one of the first to wonder what had happened to the English language in these years.

The changes to the English language at this time meant not only the impact of Americanisms, 'slang' and the language of advertising, but the realisation that the pernicious effects of wartime propaganda, modern 'total war' and mass mobilisation, had not been restricted to Russian and German but could also be discerned in English. Changes had begun to creep into everyone's view of the world and to affect both the way politicians spoke and the way their messages were received.

Orwell stated very clearly that he believed the English language was 'in a bad way' by 1945. People, he said, now let hackneyed phrases tacked together do the thinking for them, and less and less were words chosen for their precise impact or

sense. Overloaded with meaningless jargon and pretentious phrases and words, the language was, he said, even when used by doctors, politicians, scientists and literary critics, often imprecise, 'ugly and inaccurate'.

But Orwell's interest in the way language was shaped and used did not date only from the end of the Second World War. He had been a keen observer for some time before this. For Orwell, the corruption of politics inevitably entailed the corruption of language (and vice versa) since in modern times the Party Line, whether it was left or right, Progressive or Reactionary, was usually the 'defence of the indefensible' – censorship, British rule in India, the Russian purges, post-war 'population exchanges', mass deportations, Nazi prison camps, dropping the atom bomb, torture and imprisonment.

In an essay which appeared in July 1946 Orwell wrote:

In England the *immediate* enemies of truthfulness, and hence of freedom of thought, are the Press lords, the film magnates, and the bureaucrats, but that on a long view the weakening of the desire for liberty among intellectuals themselves is the most serious symptom of all. It may seem that all this time I have been talking about the effects of censorship, not on literature as a whole, but merely on one department of political journalism. Granted that Soviet Russia constitutes a sort of forbidden area in the British Press, granted that issues like Poland, and the Spanish civil war, the Russo-German pact, and so forth, are debarred from serious discussion, and that if you possess information that conflicts with the prevailing orthodoxy you are expected either to distort it or keep quiet about it - granted all this, why should literature in the wider sense be affected? Is every writer a politician, and is every book necessarily a work of straightforward 'reportage'? Even under the tightest dictatorship, cannot the individual writer remain free inside his own mind and distil or disguise his unorthodox ideas in such a way that the authorities will be too stupid to recognise them? And in any case, if the writer himself is in agreement with the prevailing orthodoxy, why should it have any cramping effect on him? Is not literature, or any of the arts, likeliest to flourish in societies in which there are no major conflicts of opinion and no sharp distinction between the artists and his audience? Does one have to assume that every writer is a rebel, or even that a writer as such is an exceptional person?

Whenever one attempts to defend intellectual liberty against the claims of totalitarianism, one meets with these arguments in one form or another. They are based on a complete misunderstanding of what literature is, and how - one should perhaps say why - it comes into being. They assume that a writer is either a mere entertainer or else a venal hack who can switch from one line of propaganda to another as easily as an organ grinder changing tunes. But after all, how is it that books ever come to be written? Above a quite low level, literature is an attempt to influence the viewpoint of one's contemporaries by recording experience. And so far as freedom of expression is concerned, there is not much difference between a mere journalist and the most 'un-political' imaginative writer. The journalist is un-free, and is conscious of un-freedom, when he is forced to write lies or suppress what seems to him important news: the imaginative writer is un-free

when he has to falsify his subjective feelings, which from his point of view are facts. He may distort and caricature reality in order to make his meaning clearer, but he cannot misrepresent the scenery of his own mind: he cannot say with any conviction that he likes what he dislikes, or believes what he disbelieves. If he is forced to do so, the only result is that his creative faculties dry up. Nor can he solve the problem by keeping away from controversial topics. There is no such thing as genuinely non-political literature, and least of all in an age like our own, when fears, hatreds, and loyalties of a directly political kind are near to the surface of everyone's consciousness. Even a single taboo can have an all-round crippling effect upon the mind, because there is always the danger that any thought which is freely followed up may lead to the forbidden thought. It follows that the atmosphere of totalitarianism is deadly to any kind of prose writer, though a poet, at any rate a lyric poet, might possibly find it breathable. And in any totalitarian society that survives for more than a couple of generations, it is probable that prose literature, of the kind that has existed during the past four hundred years, must actually *come to an end*.<sup>1</sup>

Orwell's considered opinion was that politics was 'a mass of lies, evasions, folly, hatred and schizophrenia' and that political language was 'designed to make lies sound truthful and murder respectable'. It was, he thought, only by using tired old metaphors and stale images that politicians could manage to drum up any political interest at all, by appealing to established habits of mind, without disclosing the real content of what was under discussion. Today we call this 'spin'.

For Orwell it was important for every writer to make a start at improving politics and literature by improving their own language use. He proposed that we simply abolish old metaphors and stale ways of phrasing things, that we abolish pomposity and instead pursue plainness of style, prose purged of disguise. He asked that writers and politicians be required to choose their words with great care, paying close attention to meaning, that they master and control the language rather than letting it run away with them.

Orwell saw that the quality of thought (political or literary) depended on the use of language, and that the precision of language depended upon the quality of thought. Orwell saw that perhaps just as much as social and economic class, the language that was available to people shaped their consciousness: without being put into language thought remained at best confused and at worst became a repeated 'sound bite'. Careful use of language, Orwell was certain, would aid the elevation of the political consciousness necessary for democracy.

Orwell understood that language is a tool that humans consciously use for their own ends. He was clear that humans can affect language and choose the language they employ. They do not have to work within the language that is 'given' to them by a particular culture, class or life-style, but can express the ideas they want by developing their language skills and the clarity of their expression.

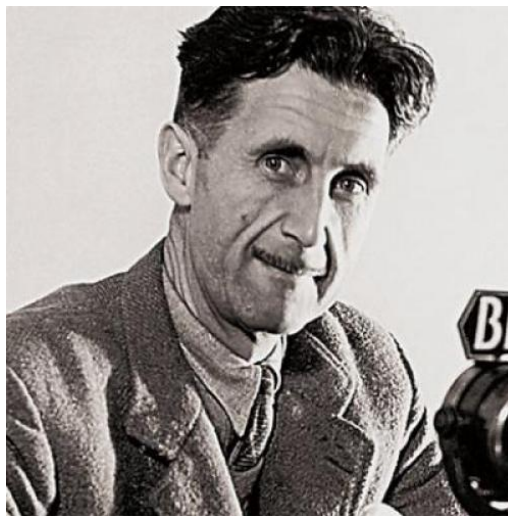
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<sup>1</sup> G. Orwell, 'The Prevention of Literature' in: *Inside the Whale and Other Essays* (Secker & Warburg, London, 1957).

Orwell did not approach the issue of language choice and use as an academic, teacher or a scientist, nor was he a politically detached or neutral observer. Orwell was a sober and dedicated leftist and democrat. He believed that if ordinary people did not fight totalitarianism, it would be possible for totalitarianism (fascist or Stalinist) to triumph anywhere. Accurate language use, Orwell insisted, was an important and basic anti-totalitarian weapon.

Orwell had witnessed the clash between fascism and democracy at first hand in the Spanish Civil War. He had fought on the Republican side and had been wounded. Towards the end of that war, as he recovered from his wound, he had seen the Communists, on Stalin's order, slaughter their Anarchist and Trotskyite allies. Orwell was well aware of the connections between politics and language and was shortly to put some of his perceptions to great creative use in the novels *Animal Farm* (1945) and *1984* (1949).

Orwell's essay - 'Politics and the English Language' - which was clearly the work of a writer thinking about the responsibilities of the writer, about the nature of writing, and about representing ideas accurately in writing. It also struck a chord with the post-war reading public. The essay was immediately both popular and influential. The problems Orwell outlined in 1946 are still with us, and his essay has been in print ever since. Orwell's convictions about the responsibilities of the writer in their use of language were deeply held and, like his observations on politics, have helped to shape and inform the opinions of thinkers and writers who came after him.



What is the opposite of *responsibility* in writing? Is it *irresponsibility*? Maybe, but recently the word *transgression* has become fashionable. However, I am not sure that transgression is the opposite of responsibility.

The *OED* tells us the meaning of transgression is to go over the limit; to break the law; to pass beyond the bounds of legality; a violation, of law, duty or command; disobedience, trespass, sin.

*The Pocket Oxford Dictionary* adds: to infringe; to out-step laid down limits; to sin.

Roget's *Thesaurus* offers: to disobey, non-observance, a guilty act. But it is possible to transgress without any sense of responsibility

I regard the word transgression rather warily because for me just about all writing *is* transgressive on some level: the natural order of things is not to write – a world without writing: to write is to transgress, to go against the usual order of things: to say you are writing something transgressive is to say the same thing twice - you are writing some writing... you are transgressing by transgressing...

However, how you define the opposite of responsibility depends on how you define responsibility. There is an element of transgression that is connected to responsibility and it is possible to write transgressively with a very sure and certain sense of responsibility – look at the work of George Orwell.

However, Orwell is not to everybody's liking. For example take a look at Steven Poole's essay, 'My Problem with George Orwell', (*The Guardian*, 17 January 2013): [www.theguardian.com/books/2013/jan/17/my-problem-with-george-orwell](http://www.theguardian.com/books/2013/jan/17/my-problem-with-george-orwell).

### Follow-Up Work

Find George Orwell's essay 'Politics and the English Language' It can be found in:

- Orwell's essay collection *Shooting an Elephant*
- Orwell's essay collection *Why I Write*
- *The Collected Essays, Journalism and Letters of George Orwell*, vol. 4

It can also be found online at several websites including:

- [www.orwell.ru/library/essays/politics/english/e\\_polit](http://www.orwell.ru/library/essays/politics/english/e_polit).

Read the essay carefully. Read it as a writer. Then consider the following questions:

- Is Orwell's title a good one?
- Collect some examples of recent prose which you think illustrate Orwell's argument. Say why you think they do so.
- Comment on Orwell's prose – particularly his metaphors and figures of speech - using his own criteria.
- How good are Orwell's six rules? How helpful are they? What does rule number six mean? Did Orwell break any of his own rules? If so, which?
- What do you think Orwell means when he talks of precision and accuracy in using language? In what ways is it possible to be *accurate* in language use? Should writers bother themselves with this?
- Do you think Orwell is right – are all writers political? In what ways is writing political? In what ways could what you write be seen as political? Do you feel that politics and writing collide in your work? If so, in what ways? Do you think that reading Orwell's essay can help restore clarity and honesty to writing and political life?

- Collect five examples of prose like those given by Orwell. See if you can analyse them in the way that Orwell has done.
- Does it matter if people mangle the language? In what ways does language show how we think? Why is clarity of expression important to writers?
- Does it matter how politicians speak and write? Do you think writers are somehow opposed to politicians? In what ways?
- Is honesty part of a writer's work? Why? In what way?
- Do you think the English language is 'diseased'? If so, why and in what ways? Give some current examples.
- In what ways do you think reading Orwell's essay can help writers?
- Do you think that reading Orwell's essay can help restore clarity and honesty to writing and political life? Do you think these things are important? Should writers bother themselves with this?
- Do you think reading Orwell's essay can help a writer to write more clearly or acquire a plainer style? How? Has it helped you? If so, in what way?
- Orwell seems to have thought of writers as natural 'anti-totalitarians'. Do you feel this is a reasonable attitude to all writers? Do you feel the description of 'anti-totalitarian' fits you and your work in any way or on any level?
- Is Orwell right – is language accurate or is it a kind of filter? In what ways is it possible to be *accurate* in language use? Do you think language represents the world accurately?
- Orwell was writing in 1946. Is the English language still as 'diseased' as he thought? If so, why and in what ways? Should we do anything about it? If so, why? What can be done about it?
- What is Steven Poole's main objection to Orwell's essay? Do you think he is right?
- Read one of the following:
  - H. Korten, *Vocabulary of Soviet Society and Culture*
  - V. Klemperer, *The Language of the Third Reich*
  - P. Levi, *The Drowned and the Saved*
  - S. Poole, *Unspeak: Words are Weapons*
  - C. Tighe, *The Politics of Literature* (particularly chapter 10)
  - J. W. Young, *Totalitarian Language*
- After reading one of these texts, what would you say are the important points you would like to make – as a writer – about politics and language?
- Consider your own style. Is there anything in Orwell's essay that might apply to the way you write? In what ways do you think this essay links to the development of *your* writing style? What changes can you suggest to improve your own writing style? How can you write more effectively?
- In what way is this topic of politics and the English language linked to the theme of Representation?