A Brave New Language: Orwell’s Invention of *Newspeak* in 1984

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"The Revolution will be complete when the language is perfect. *Newspeak* is *Ingsoc* and *Ingsoc* is *Newspeak*," he added with a sort of mystical satisfaction. "Has it ever occurred to you, Winston, that by the year 2050, at the very latest, not a single human being will be alive who could understand such a conversation as we are having now?"

Unfortunately, we’re not there yet. We’re only in the year 1986, and our Revolution has not yet been completed. Our final Revolution, as Zamiatine would say, the one which will lead us to the ideal state "where nothing else will ever happen." Our society is still at a stage in its history when linguistic difference exists, when *Oldspeak*, an everyday and ordinary language, coexists with *Newspeak*, the official language of the Party, of the government of the people, a perfect language, the best of languages. The road leading to this language purified of all heretical thought, in which *thought-crime* will be quite simply unthinkable, is long and rough. But, inspired by Big Brother’s doctrine, a cohort of anonymous and tenacious linguists, champions of language, are laboring relentlessly on a gigantic project of linguistic purification. Their devotion is admirable, and they will more than fulfill the objectives of the project, the tenth edition of the *Newspeak* dictionary. Shakespeare and Milton have already been translated; Swift, Byron, Dickens, and others will soon follow. And then the Revolution will be complete: no human being will ever again understand the old language, a dead language which dooms man’s memory to oblivion. No one will be left to speak, to write, to remember . . . except the proletarians. "But the proles are not human beings," Syme, the philologist, would add.

Totalitarian power has a real stake in language and aims to dominate it. This is the warning given by Orwell in 1984 with his invention of Substance N° 50, 1986

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Newspeak. Beneath the satire we can decipher a muted anxiety and an ultimate appeal: the novel ends with an appendix explaining Newspeak, and the novel ends Orwell's own life as well. No totalitarian power, however, has ever been able to establish this type of language-police, even though such powers did dream of it from time to time. So why this final cry? What did Orwell mean, what did he want to show by inventing Newspeak?

The idea of such a tool for thought standardization is hardly coincidental. To understand how it operates, one need only examine the basic principle governing the slavery which flourishes in Oceania: totalitarian power keeps people under a surveillance which is both visible and invisible, continuous and meticulous, which patrols and scrutinizes each one of them. The apparatus which makes this silent and close surveillance possible has thus converted the entire society into a reading book; the social body has become a text and the body of each subject a sign whose slightest variations can be detected by a careful reading: a slip of the tongue, a shade of doubt, an occasional uneasiness, a hint of emotion. Power treats human bodies as so many signs to be subjected to an incessant decoding process: its eye isolates, examines, judges, and corrects them, sometimes eradicates, even "vaporizes" them when necessary. To that extent, only light and an asymmetrical vision, which sees without being seen, are needed.

The master is a pedagogue and society a vast undertaking of reeducation. This produces a new type of man: the uprooted man. The imprisoning eye shatters traditional bonds, strains or breaks the ties of kinship or friendship, prevents all complicity. People who are identical to one another become alien to one another. They must also be expropriated from their own selves: the recollection of a past, of another time or place, a memory of childhood, are erased and continually rewritten for them. The uprooted man is amnesiac, memory is forbidden him. He is no more than the thin surface of a sign given to the gaze, condemned to impassibility and dispossessed of all interiority. "By the time we had finished with them, they were only the shells of men," explains O'Brien to Winston.

Power must thus become master of language since language is the living memory of man and offers him a space for inner resistance. Language constitutes a screen between the totalitarian gaze and the human body, it offers the shelter of its shadow, it veils the harsh light needed to read bodies. Language threatens the totalitarian enterprise. It is in fact the zone of obscurity where the gaze is lost. People must therefore be cured of their language: old and obscure terms must be eliminated, areas that escape definition, and zones of indetermination-ambiguity, equivocation, polysemy wiped out. Signs must be purged and purified of their meaning and bodies of their substance. And then they must be refilled: "You will be hollow," promises O'Brien. "We shall squeeze you empty, and then we shall fill you with ourselves."

It is in Orwell's criticism of contemporary totalitarianism that we must
look for the origin of the invention of Newspeak. Orwell’s desperate lucidity drove into language itself the logic of social prophylaxis proper to the totalitarian enterprise: power treats bodies as signs, but also signs as bodies. Its gaze, at once medical and investigatory, which scans the social body now penetrates language, with the same effects. On the one hand people are deported then exterminated, on the other language is up-rooted then depopulated of its words. “Social parasites” are exterminated, and all that is superfluous to syntax and vocabulary is eliminated (the irregular, the redundant, the accessory. . . . “No element which could be dispensed with had the right to survive.”); bodies are mutilated, and signs are abbreviated; the perfect regularity of grammatical order corresponds to conformity to social order. . . .

Purification of language thus constitutes the imaginary horizon of totalitarian power: the final solution, the completion of the Revolution, the end of history.

We cannot leave it at that, however, for two reasons. It must be noted first of all that the description of Newspeak in 1984 appears in the detailed form of a technical grammatical appendix. Orwell did not settle for a general or allusive presentation. We ought therefore to examine the coherence of this description, and this opens up the question as to the sources of this imaginary language.

Second, the discussion of Newspeak’s sources brings us to an issue that meant a great deal to Orwell: the totalitarian temptation is not alien to us. We cannot guard against it by simply pushing it off to another place and another time. The fantasy of a pure language, of a tool for perfect power which bows to the master’s slightest desire and assures him the willing docility of his subjects, recurs in the history of our ideas: certain texts resound like faraway echoes of Orwell’s linguistic inventions. Beyond the historical context in which 1984 was written, Newspeak must be inscribed in a longer tradition because the coherence of its system goes back much further, even though Orwell was not necessarily aware of it.

The invention of Newspeak is generally presented as a satire of both “cablese” and Basic English.2 “Cablese” is a sort of verbal shorthand, used by journalists to dispatch their messages, which operates on the principle of systematic truncation and condensation of words. It is in this form that O’Brien delivers his instructions and that Winston receives his at the Ministry of Truth. This technique must have been familiar to the journalist Orwell, and it could hardly have satisfied his taste for a clear, simple, and explicit style.3

Basic English4 is an international language experiment, imagined by C. K. Ogden. It falls into the category of minimal languages, that is, of international languages derived from a natural language by a massive reduction of its lexical stock and by the elimination of its main syntactical or morphological difficulties. It is a syntactically simplified English of 850
words, an "ideally simple" language corresponding to the linguistic competence of a six-year-old child. Its invention is not without hegemonic designs: it was to turn English into the international language of business and politics. Ogden comments with a hint of cynicism not unlike Big Brother's overtones: "What the world needs most, is about a thousand more dead languages, and one that's more alive.""7 Orwell, who during the 1930s had been interested in this experiment, ultimately grew disenchanted and turned away from it. The satire of Basic English is transparent in Newspeak. "We are destroying words-scores of them, hundreds of them, every days. . . ." confides Syme to Winston with a sort of mystical exaltation. "The primary principle of Basic, which made the reduced vocabulary possible, is the elimination of the verb,"8 echoes Ogden. Basic English is without doubt the most probable source of Newspeak, and the relationship is not fortuitous; its necessity lies much deeper.

There exist in fact many other texts which dream of language in terms of an ideal of transparency, the likes of which are echoed, each in its own way, in Basic English and Newspeak. They belong to the grammatical tradition, the languages invented in utopias, especially in the seventeenth century, certain philosophical languages of the eighteenth century, the international languages created at the end of the nineteenth and at the beginning of the twentieth centuries. Although functioning in a different fashion and within their specific context, they demand most often the simplicity and clarity stressed by Ogden and bitterly derided by Orwell.

As a case in point, we might consider certain utopian languages conceived during the French classical period, those of D. Vairasse d'Al-laix, G. de Foigny, or S. Tyssot de Patot. The languages invented by these schoolmasters lay claim, as does Newspeak, to an absolute pedagogical value. Like Newspeak, they banish indeterminacy, display impeccable alignment in their inflections, abolish all exceptions, homogenize and weld into one the distinct categories of noun and verb. The transparency in language mirrors the geometrical design of utopian cities, the leveling of a terrain whose mountains have sometimes been removed, the harmony which reigns between the sexes and the classes. Nothing that catches the eye. . . . Triumph of geometry in language, but especially, triumph of surveillance over language.

In the lineage of these rationalist utopias, which constitutes an essential reference and from which the conception of society and language in 1984 draws to a large extent its coherence, one work stands out. A program-utopia, an applied and utilitarian rationalism which places all things under the everpenetrating eye of surveillance: the Panopticon of Jeremy Bentham. The telescreen, a device which allows a grid-work to be placed over the whole of society by an asymmetrical and continuous gaze, is a delocalization and a generalization of the panoptic machine invented by Bentham for his penitentiary house. The effects are the same in both cases: "To be constantly under the eyes of an inspector," explains Ben-
tham, "is to lose the power to do evil and almost the thought to wish it." People will be docile, for their own good.

The invention of Newspeak owes much to this ideal of absolute visibility, and Orwell had rediscovered it in Ogden's minimal language. In the latter's work, one concern recurs with obsessive regularity: that the entire vocabulary of Basic English "be visible at a single glance," that it may be printed 'on one side of a single sheet of paper.' Nothing surprising about that: Ogden was one of the most authoritative interpreters of the linguistic developments in Bentham's thought. Basic English is merely its application. Besides, in 1929 Ogden had already conceived of a language even more abbreviated than Basic because it contained no more than 500 vocabulary words. Its name? Panoptic English. . . .

The panoptic eye has taken over language; nothing in human thought can ever again escape it. No shelter. . . . "No dark spot!" repeated Bentham. That is exactly where Winston, who harbored a sinful nostalgia for language, was led to: he was taken to the Ministry of Love, "to the place where there is no darkness."

This is the history of an impossible dream and its failure: meaning dimmed, then vanished. Language stammers. People repeat, like robots. Their noise is close to silence.

We brought truth and in our mouths it seemed like a lie. We brought you freedom, and in our hands it seemed like a whip. We have brought you true life and where our voice rises, trees grow barren and the rustle of dead leaves can be heard.  

Translated by Laura Willett

NOTES

1. I wish to thank Shushi Kao for her suggestions about the English translation of this paper.
5. Ogden, p. 18.
6. Ogden, p. 5.

8. On this point, see *L'Oeil du pouvoir* (Paris: Belfond, 1977). B. Crick indicated to me, in a personal note, that he had found no reference to Bentham in Orwell’s writings and it is unlikely, in fact, that Orwell knew of the *Panopticon*. The reference to Bentham does not exclude the possibility that Orwell based his story mainly on the method of police surveillance which he saw developing in totalitarian regimes. But once one begins to speculate on the sources of *1984*, reference to the *Panopticon* seems to me essential. I have developed this point in a work which deals specifically with the question of surveillance and language in *1984*, to be published by Denoël/Clims, Paris.
