Newspeak and the Impoverishment of Language

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In his appendix on language in the world of *1984*, George Orwell explains that "Newspeak was the official language of Oceania and had been devised to meet the ideological needs of Ingsoc, or English Socialism." Newspeak was created for the ultimate purpose of thought control. By reducing the English language (Oldspeak) to a utilitarian skeleton, dispensing with all verb tense irregularities and syntactical complexity, and by scaling down word choice to a bare minimum, it destroyed the ambiguity of human communication and would eventually "diminish the range of human thought." Most people had not yet adopted Newspeak as their only means of communication, but it was intended that by the year 2050 Oldspeak would be made totally obsolete by the new Party language.

Perhaps *1984* analogies will become tiresome and overworked very early in the year. The year 1984 was 1948 for Orwell of course, and aspects of this "fictional" world are easily mirrored in any year of our modern myopic age. The uncanny truth of the analogies shouldn't surprise us. There are no off-the-wall coincidences here. We're on a treadmill and have been long before 1948; it's just that Orwell was astute enough, perceptive enough, to write it all down, and with such clear, sharp wit and honest irony that history seems to ring truer and truer each year. It is 1984 after all, and some things do just jolt you.

Computer Language Shoved Down Our Throats

Newspeak isn't being openly imposed on us by our government, but the communications industry is shoving computers, computer systems, systems communications, and the vapid, facile language of computer technology down our consumptive throats. Computer companies are inundating schools with free computers in their mad rush to sell the world on this "new, practical, effective, efficient, invaluable mode of communication." Through school and television and video arcades, it is hoped that our vulnerable children will be easily won over to the cause of the computer revolution. By being exposed at every turn to the world of computer technology—in study, in play, in creative activity—they will become fluent in the language of systems communications, adept at responding with the right password and appropriate obeisance to computer command, and so set the stage for future generations.

Computerspeak and Newspeak are strikingly similar in certain respects. In both languages difficult spelling is changed and simplified. Many words are abbreviated, and new and efficient compound words are constructed. Traditional correct grammar and regular syntax are sacrificed for alleged clarity and simplicity in order to avoid the ambiguous or the possibility of shades of meaning. Abstractions of Oldspeak simply cannot be expressed in Newspeak. Orwell gives us an example: "The word free still existed in Newspeak, but it could only be used in such statements as 'This dog is free from lice' or 'This field is free from weeds.' It could not be used in its old sense of 'politically free' or 'intellectually free' since political and intellectual freedom no longer existed even as concepts, and were therefore of necessity nameless."

All other words that expressed antiquated concepts of freedom or equality were included in one Newspeak word: crimethink. Computers of course only accept responses constructed of their own limited vocabulary; all other

responses are categorized as syntax error. The language of technology, like Newspeak, is of necessity standardized,-streamlined, concrete and elementary. While in Newspeak you find such words as:

Miniluv (Minister of Love), bellyfeel (blind acceptance), goodthink (orthodoxy), joycamp (forced labor camp), unperson, speedful, and untold; in Computerspeak you have such words as: Basic and Fortran (two computer languages that are considered simple and straight forward), input, output, crash, feedback, interface, flip-flop, memopak, zeroflag, warm-boot, and linefeed. The powerful inner structure of a certain computer is called "Soul." One who works on computers is a "servoprotein." Computerspeak is simply destroying the former "archaic" meanings of abstract words such as: memory, truth, time, logic, think, freedom and friendship. It is mutilating some words and creating countless others from abbreviations. Words themselves, of course, are not spoken or written but "processed." What follows are two partial explanations of the processes of a new computer from a technology trade journal:

> "There are no tri-state gates, and no provisions for wired ORing of the outputs of two or more gates. Each has a '0' delay; and there is no provision for adding the delays necessary to create flip-flops or adjust the circuit for dc convergence where feedback is used. Rather than arbitrary inputs, you must use signal sources for your inputs.

> "You must have a network listing, a pattern and have defined the order of your output node display in memory before involving simulator. If any portion is missing, your RUN will bomb-out requiring a RESET and PR 6."

Language of Big Business and Advertising

We see in the already well established language of big business and advertising, the seeds of computer-speak. It is here that one observes the blatant, steady development of a world in which people are conceptualized as objects, as resources. I was recently talking about life with a young man who turned out to be a business administration student. Towards the end of our discussion, he told me that he had enjoyed "marketing" together. I replied, deeply insulted, that I wasn't sure what he was doing, but that I was merely discussing life with him. He insisted that we were both marketing, trying to convince the other of our point of view, selling ourselves. My concept of sharing ideas was much too archaic and only seemed to confuse him. In big business, Particularly in management, there are such concepts as: network theory, queuing, quantitative analysis, programming, management style, motivation, demotivation, commercial awareness, performance appraisal, dysfunctional activity, hi-lo management. These are cold, fearsome words to my mind, but they have become all too familiar in a society that unquestioningly views commodities and consumption as its lifeblood.

My fear comes from the realization that these are not simply trade languages, isolated buzzwords, or the obscure jargon of specialized professions and activities. As big business and technology have exploited humankind, they have exploited its language in the process, just as Newspeak abused Oldspeak. And now, in turn, they invade our popular every-day speech. We find ourselves using such words as "input" and "feedback." We inadvertently trade our dictionary definitions of certain words like "soul" or "freedom" for the mutilated utilitarian definitions of a computer, and soon we will become oblivious to such flagrant travesty. We will be discussing life with a friend and find that we are marketing.

Yet it is the language of politicians which is so obviously characteristic of one of the most significant aspects of Newspeak. To one versed in Oldspeak, many Newspeak words mean the opposite of what they seem to be expressing. So, for example, "joycamp" was a forced labor camp, "goodsex" meant chastity, "miniluv" was the governmental agency responsible for law and order, and "doublethink" meant reality control. "Pax" or peace, meant war in actuality, and peace as we understand it simply did not exist as a concept in Newspeak. Clearly this must also be the meaning of the word for Ronald Reagan and Caspar Weinberger. There is an Environmental Protection Agency—a term reflecting a warehouse concept of nature that falls deep into semantic absurdity—which sets guidelines for the dumping of toxic wastes. We have a Department of Defense—in actuality a Department of Offense—which

initiates war and foments right-wing counter-revolution. We also have a Department of Welfare which distributes a miserable pittance to the poor to keep them poor.

Examples of political doublespeak abound. There are arms reductions talks and concepts of "build-down" while we continue to develop our nuclear and conventional arms capabilities by leaps and bounds. The three Party slogans of Ingsoc in 1984 don't seem all that absurd or illogical now that our ears are accustomed to the sincere teasetalk of promising politicians: (1) War is Peace (they are building up nuclear arsenals and feeding the entire war machine in order to ensure peace, right?) (2) Freedom is slavery (This is what we must explain to the people of Nicaragua, Guatemala and El Salvador.) (3) Ignorance is Strength (This would fit nicely as part of the slogan for America's finest: the Few, the Proud, the Marines.) This all begins to make sense once we let doublethink do its thing and listen seriously to our concerned Party leaders talk to us in the most refined dialect of Newspeak: Duckspeak, speech which, according to Orwell, issued from the larynx without involving the higher brain centers. Any one of these leaders could be described with the same Newspeak noun/adjective used to laud a party orator in Oceania: he was a doublep/usgood duckspeaker.

Fragmented, Cold, Unexpressive Language

In this real world of 1984, we consciously and unconsciously respond to a myriad of very dangerous subtle and overt influences. It is an obvious fact that language profoundly reflects the environment, the culture, the lifestyle of the people who speak it. In an increasingly urbanized, suburbanized, streamlined environment where our wilderness is polluted, destroyed, smoothed over to make way for high-rises, shopping malls, expressways, factories and nuclear power plants, it is small wonder that our senses are becoming dulled and our language impoverished. Our hearing is deafened by the roar of engines, our sense of smell deadened by burning poisons, and our frantic speech is fast becoming fragmented, cold and unexpressive.

My grandparents knew the names and the medicinal qualities of numerous wild herbs and grasses, the songs and names of a multitude of birds, the leaves and bark of countless trees, the phases of the moon. I know only categories and must search through books for lost details. Lewis Mumford speaks of the birth of language and man's environment: "If man had originally inhabited a world as blankly uniform as a 'high-rise' housing development, as featureless as a parking lot, as destitute as an automated factory, it is doubtful if he would have had a sufficiently varied sensory experience to retain images, mold language, or acquire ideas."

As we methodically lose our connection with the earth and its infinite diversity, our language becomes more and more refined, terse, standardized and insipid. As progress and technology transform our way of life and our physical surroundings, they eat away at our language, enfeeble our spirits, and perhaps without even the intention of controlling us, control us still by systematically destroying the creative options that sprout from a humane and naturally balanced world.

A Mountain of Mediocrity

And yet, you may counter, in spite of all these signs of the deterioration and degeneration of language, literature is flourishing, the written word lives as it has never lived before. There are more publications than ever before, more books, paperbacks, magazines, journals, newspapers and reviews. Perhaps this phenomenon represents a refusal on the part of individuals to accept the alienation created by a world of computerspeak and duckspeak. But the publishing business suffers the malaise of all big business; we are flooded with more published material than we could possibly consume and we are lost in a mountain of mediocrity. There are also more writers, poets, novelists, journalists, than ever before. At times it seems that everyone is talking or writing and that no one is listening or reading. The mountain keeps growing, of course, and one hardly knows where to begin reading or who truly has something to say that's worth listening to.

The Eastern European writer, Milan Kundera, writes about this phenomenon of literary over-abundance or "mass graphomania," as he calls it, in one of his stories. He explains it as a mass spirited effort to save oneself from

the void. "The reason is that everyone has trouble accepting the fact he will disappear unheard of and unnoticed into an indifferent universe, and everyone wants to make himself into a universe of words before it's too late." (*The Book of Laughter and Forgetting*, 1980) It is a natural human need to be acknowledged, to be noticed, but this is only part of the older, more all-encompassing human instinct of reciprocity, which includes the active and the passive, the offering and the acceptance, the speaking and the listening. We are in danger of losing hold of the last threads of our humanity. "Once the writer in every individual comes to life (and that time is not far off)," Kundera tells us, "we are in for an age of universal deafness and lack of understanding." We need not accept Kundera's scenario as inevitable and inescapable, but we are forewarned. We must find a way to let our senses rest, refuse to speak the empty chatter of machines, seek out the immeasurable silence of the remaining wilderness, and step ever so carefully into this year.