Newspeak Warrants New Thought: Orwell's Nineteen Eighty-Four and Linguistic Determinism in Nazi Language

Barry Rogenmoser
St. John Fisher College

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Recommended Citation
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Keywords
Nineteen Eighty-Four, Newspeak, Nazi, Language, Linguistic Determinism, Orwell, 1984
Introduction

“By 2050 earlier, probably -- all real knowledge of Oldspeak will have disappeared. The whole literature of the past will have been destroyed. Chaucer, Shakespeare, Milton, Byron -- they'll exist only in Newspeak versions, not merely changed into something different, but actually changed into something contradictory of what they used to be. Even the literature of the Party will change. Even the slogans will change. How could you have a slogan like "freedom is slavery" when the concept of freedom has been abolised? The whole climate of thought will be different. In fact there will be no thought, as we understand it now. Orthodoxy means not thinking -- not needing to think. Orthodoxy is unconsciousness” (Orwell 53).

Language has a tremendous influence on thought-processes and power over behavior, and the linguistic limitations that control the citizens in George Orwell’s dystopian novel Nineteen Eighty-Four demonstrate this effect. Although Orwell created the fictitious language of Newspeak exclusively as an authoritarian control method in the novel, this is not a concept that exists exclusively in Orwellian fiction. Language curtailing and linguistic alteration designed to restrain individuals existed in the early twentieth century, particularly in extremist and totalitarian political parties during the early nineteenth century. Colonial theory suggests that the presence of an outside conqueror leads to the imposition of a new language, which oftentimes results in limiting the native people’s ability to conceptualize thoughts of opposition and autonomously express themselves. Although Nineteen Eighty-Four is not a colonial text, the language imposed by the authoritarian government functions in the same way that the language imposed by a colonial force does: it limits the ability of the people to express themselves. Although Nineteen Eighty-Four is frequently read as a warning against a future that may one day reach fruition, Orwell’s Newspeak mirrors the linguistic influence of the Nazi party that existed during the early twentieth century. By analyzing Newspeak terminology and paralleling the function of language within Oceania and Nazi, Germany, Nineteen Eighty-Four looks less dystopian and more satirical.

The Principles of Newspeak

Nineteen Eighty-Four, George Orwell’s swan song to literature, depicts the tragedy of Winston Smith as he attempts to undermine an oppressive regime. He lives in the totalitarian superstate of Oceania, which is controlled by the Inner Party and their advanced surveillance techniques, called Big Brother. In an effort to live an individualistic and pre-Revolutionized life, Winston begins to write in a diary, engages in sexual relations for pleasure, and joins the Brotherhood, which are all severely punished crimes in Oceania. He eventually discovers that he was monitored by a telescreen all along, and O’Brien, a member of the Inner Party, psychologically torments Winston to the point where he no longer can will himself to defy Big Brother.
Newspeak is the fictional language in the novel, and although it has not yet been fully adopted by the characters in the novel, it is designated as the official language of Oceania. The eventual antagonist, O’Brien, asserts that Newspeak will completely replace Oldspeak, or traditional English, by the year 2050. Not much is revealed about Newspeak within the narrative of the novel; however, Orwell includes an appendix chapter titled, “The Principles of Newspeak,” which outlines the grammar, semantics, and pragmatics of the language. Newspeak advocates intend to remove undesirable words, eliminate unnecessary secondary definitions, include blanket terms that shroud specificity, and shorten words in order to reduce inherent biases and diminish the range of thought.

“The Principles of Newspeak” supplements the primary text by revealing exactly how Newspeak is designed to limit thought and suppress individualism. The first objective of Newspeak is to eliminate secondary definitions of words that allow for intellectual independence. The example that Orwell gives of this definition reduction is the word “free.” The word “free” has two definitions in the traditional English language: to not be under the control of another power and to rid of something. In Newspeak, the first definition is abolished; therefore, political participation and intellectual freedom no longer exist as concepts, and the range of thought is shortened (305). Within the narrative of the novel, this is expressed by Syme, who is Winston’s coworker. He says to Winston:

Don't you see that the whole aim of Newspeak is to narrow the range of thought? In the end we shall make thought crime literally impossible, because there will be no words in which to express it. Every concept that can ever be needed will be expressed by exactly one word, with its meaning rigidly defined and all its subsidiary meanings rubbed out and forgotten. (53)

Not only are the words with multiple definitions going to lose their secondary meanings that are deemed frivolous and oppositional to the party, but every idea will be boiled down to only one word. Synonyms and colorful expression will be eradicated in order to eliminate the ability to think about antagonism or revolution.

After Newspeak is accepted, there will only be three types of vocabularies: the A words, which are needed for everyday business; the B Words, which were invented for political purposes; and the C Words, which are specific to science and technology. Within the B Words are terms that have “highly subtilized meaning, barely intelligible to anyone who had not mastered the language as a whole” (Orwell 307). These words have political intentions, so they are never ideologically neutral. Each term or phrase is reduced to the smallest number of syllables that can keep the derivative words. An example of this is “sexcrime,” which is any sexual act that is prohibited by the government in Nineteen Eighty-Four. This includes all sex that is not exclusively intended to be for procreation, including intercourse for pleasure, homosexuality, and adultery. The appendix is concluded by the unknown narrator revealing that important literature is in the process of being translated into Newspeak, which would render the original texts unreadable. Orwell writes, “Each reduction was a gain, since the smaller the area of choice, the smaller the temptation to take thought” (311). If crimes against the Inner Party become unspeakable, they become unimaginable, and would no longer be committed.
Self-perception and the understanding of an individual word stem from the vocabulary tools that are accessible. The construct of equality vis-à-vis egalitarianism is not perceivable if this particular definition of equality is eradicated. The Declaration of Independence, which states, “All men are created equal” would then be understood to say that all men are exactly the same, which would be perceived as an impossibility and would be rendered illogical. Just by eliminating one definition of a word, Orwell theorizes that it would invalidate a document as important as the Declaration of Independence, and the cultural values of the society would shift resultantly.

**Nineteen Eighty-Four as a Satirical Text**

The existing scholarship tends to view *Nineteen Eighty-Four* as a text that is predictive of a future that contemporary society is getting dangerously close to. Jean-Jacques Courtine and Laura Willett in their article, “A Brave New Language: Orwell’s Invention of ‘Newspeak’ in 1984,” address the existence of languages that function similarly to that of Newspeak and exploits the dangers of this type of linguistic manipulation. In Mireia Aragay i Sastre’s “Satire Betrayed: A Look at Orwell’s *Nineteen Eighty-Four*”, Sastre argues that *Nineteen Eighty-Four* is not a satire because it lacks the components necessary, specifically humor and one-dimensional characterization, to be considered as such. She argues that the text is Orwell’s way of warning against brute-force regimes before he died. However, if *Nineteen Eighty-Four* continues to be read as a text that is solely futuristic, an entire component of Orwell’s work is ignored. Although the novel is dystopian and it portrays elements that are slowly become true in the modern world, *Nineteen Eighty-Four* is satirical in the sense that it critiques the society that Orwell writes within.

Jean-Jacques Courtine and Laura Willett argue that the Revolution that occurred before the events depicted in the novel is actually starting to happen as a real-world conversion from Oldspeak to Newspeak takes place. Language has the power to control thought and provide a space for emotions and inner resistance to propagate; therefore, totalitarian powers have a stake in controlling language. The process of language truncation has already begun in contemporary society with the translations of Shakespeare and Milton, and this is demarking the commencement of a real-life Orwellian insurgency. In *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, O’Brien says, “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?” (53). O’Brien is illustrating that in the fictitious Oceania, language will be completely unrecognizable in less than seventy years. Although, it has not been occurring this quickly or this pointedly, the English language has transformed over time and many dated texts cannot be understood without footnotes or translations. Even though the misunderstanding of dated texts is because of shifts in meaning rather than the truncation of words, modern English already has begun to resemble a distant relative of Newspeak.

Courtine and Willett also identify that the language of Newspeak stems from two languages that actually exist: Cablese and Basic English. Cablese, or telegram style, is used in the journalism field to quickly relay messages by condensing words and using abbreviations. This style is outlined in Nelson E. Ross’s booklet, written in 1928, titled “How to Write Telegrams Properly.”
Ross explains that articles and short words such as “we,” “I,” and “that” are all unnecessary and should be omitted in Cablese, and phrases that require abbreviations include writing “get answer” when a reply is required or “report delivery” when the time of delivery needs to be known by the sender (Ross). Basic English, which is an experiment imagined by C. K. Ogden, reduces lexical stock and omits certain components of syntax and morphology. It is limited to only eight-hundred and fifty words that are at the linguistic level of a six-year-old. As both a linguist and a philosopher, Ogden found great intrigue in developing a perfectly truncated English language, and he eventually designed one that could fit on one side of a piece of paper with only five-hundred vocabulary words. This kind of curtailing allows for transparency within language, and Courtine and Willett compare this conspicuousness to Panopticon. The Panopticon is Jeremy Bentham’s vision of a ward where the guards are in a tall watchtower and the prisoners are in jail cells that surround the tower, to allow for unwitting and continuous surveillance. Panopticism acts as both an analogy for how a shortened language limits communication and how thought can be used to oppose a totalitarian enterprise. A language panopticism monitors action by eliminating unmonitored thoughts and thereby completely disallowing resistant action.

Although panopticism is representative of how language truncation acts as a constant internal monitoring technique, it is eerily reminiscent of the literal function of Big Brother and telescreens in Nineteen Eighty-Four. In Oceania, telescreens are monitoring systems inside every home, office, and street corner, and they are the mode through which Big Brother operates. The Panopticon disallows reciprocal observation; its subjects never know when they are being watched. This elicits both a perpetual state of paranoia and a constant need to act innocuously. The telescreen functions in the same way. It requires those being observed to act accordingly all the time because the slightest trigger can result in the harshest of punishments. This type of surveillance is intended to completely deter crime, and the language of Newspeak functions similarly; however, it completely takes away the tools. Language is the tool for which resistant thought is built. If the tools are taken away, the resistance follows suit.

Although it is impossible to ignore the parallels between modern day and the dystopian future in Nineteen Eighty-Four, Orwell’s intentions were to see the parallels between the text and the society that he wrote it within. Unfortunately, contemporary scholarship such as the aforementioned Courtine and Willet ignore this interpretation of the novel. Mireia Aragay i Sastre’s article does this as well. Sastre argues that Nineteen Eighty-Four is more of a warning against future totalitarianism than a satire, even though Orwell himself considered the novel to be satirical. Sastre argues that a satire must have a lack of reader-character identification, an inversion of the real world, an extreme simplification of characters and the world around them, and a sense of indirectness toward the problem that are actually being addressed. Sastre contends that Orwell fails in all of these categories that are archetypally satirical, and creates a novel that is ultimately too tragic, apprehensive, and humorless to fit the mold of a satire. Furthermore, the inclusion of literary techniques that are foreign to a satire, such as cosmic and dramatic irony, distance the text from the author’s intentions. Instead, according to Sastre, Nineteen Eighty-Four acts as a warning
against the “physical and psychological horror of totalitarianism,” rather than an illumination of how it already exists (76). Orwell thinks of his novel as a satire, or as a future that could arrive if the wrong moves are made. However, he considers it to be a distortion of the present and not a warning against totalitarian regimes.

In a letter written by George Orwell to Noel Willmett in 1944, Orwell details the developmental thesis of Nineteen Eighty-Four and his inspiration for writing the piece. Although exploring authorial intentions is slippery and oftentimes unfruitful, Orwell’s letter blatantly expresses what he is seeing in the world around him and how this sparked the need to explore these regimes through his most comfortable medium: writing. He writes:

> Already history has in a sense ceased to exist, i.e. there is no such thing as a history of our own times which could be universally accepted, and the exact sciences are endangered as soon as military necessity ceases to keep people up to the mark. Hitler can say that the Jews started the war, and if he survives that will become official history. ("George Orwell's Letter on Why He Wrote '1984")

Orwell takes on profound topics such as how subjective truth and true history are often controlled by the oppressive force, which is represented in the novel by Winston’s department of work, the Ministry of Truth. Orwell realizes that when a semantic and vocabularic shift occurs at the hands of an organization with an agenda, its results can be catastrophic. His primary example is language and its usages within Nazi, Germany, and this reveals that although he is critiquing the totalitarian enterprise, he is, more importantly, satirizing a world that he already lives in.

Orwell’s text can be viewed as being a mirror image of a society that he already saw existing around him. Although Orwell was extremely politically minded and most likely had many inspirations for writing Nineteen Eighty-Four the parallels between the world portrayed in the novel and the society that he lived in are vibrant, specifically, with his creation of Newspeak and its similar function to the language of the Third Reich.

**Linguistic Determinism**

In Gavin Evans’ *The Story of Colour: An Exploration of the Hidden Messages of the Spectrum*, he notes that the Himba tribe in Africa do not have a word in their native language for the color blue. Instead, the tribe considers blue to be nothing more than a variant of the color green. When a member of the tribe was shown multiple green color swatches and one blue color swatch, he was unable to differentiate which swatch contrasted with the others. However, when shown multiple green color splotches and one slightly-lighter green color splotch, the Himba member was able to easily distinguish which splotch varied--but the Englishman was not (Evans).

From this experiment, researchers concluded that the language spoken can affect the way color is seen, and scientists Sapir and Whorf determined that this must mean language has complete control over how our mind perceives the world and even how it thinks. However, this caused controversy in the scientific community. Although this does not necessarily mean that language controls thought, it shows that language has some correlation with an impact on perception. If language and perception are this deeply
intertwined, then the language we speak may have a larger stake in our thought than we even realize. This is the concept behind linguistic determinism. Linguistic determinism is the idea that language and its structures have a stake in human thought, as well as thought processes such as categorization, memory, and perception. The term implies that people who speak different languages as their mother tongues have different thought processes.

Ngugi Wa Thiong’o, a postcolonial scholar, wrote “The Language of African Literature” to present the importance of language and its ability to perpetuate culture and preserve ideologies. He argues that his native African language “had a suggestive power well beyond the immediate and lexical meaning” and upon the colonization by British imperialism, these nuances and connotations were abolished by the aggressively forced imposition of English (287). In order to express the communicative and suggestive weight that language carries, he writes, “Language carries culture, and culture carries, particularly through orature and literature, the entire body of value by which we come to perceive ourselves and our places in the world” (290). Although Ngugi is presenting this information with the conclusion that African literature should remain in its native tongue to liberate native beings from foreign forces, the underlying principle is an important foundation for how Newspeak function in *Nineteen Eighty-Four* and how totalitarian regimes used language to manipulate their subordinates in the early twentieth century.

**Nazi Propaganda Ministry**

Nazi Germany had a division of government called the Nazi Propaganda Ministry, which orchestrated the massive campaign to promote the Nazi ideologies and disenfranchise Jews. They burned books, spread propaganda posters, and rewrote textbooks that were taught in German schools. Richard J. Evans, author of *The Third Reich in Power*, asserts that the Nazi Propaganda Ministry believed that the unbiased teaching of history is a misconception of liberals. He writes, "The purpose of history was to teach people that life was always dominated by struggle, that race and blood were central to everything that happened in the past, present and future, and that leadership determined the fate of peoples. Central themes in the new teaching including courage in battle, sacrifice for a greater cause, boundless admiration for the Leader and hatred of Germany's enemies, the Jews" (263). Language is powerful because it holds the ability to manipulate the minds of those who have no reason to disbelieve it. Language’s ability to manipulate is part of the reason free speech laws in Germany and other European countries hold the stipulation that hate speech and malicious group targeting is not tolerable (Tsesis 1064). The mind is so malleable and impressionable that exposure alone can incite an overwhelming response.

Orwell mentions that the name of the Nazi party functions in the same way that the aforementioned “sexcrime” does as a conglomerate of politically charged and subjectively perceived components. He writes, “Telescoped words and phrases had been one of the characteristic features of political language; and it had been noticed that the tendency to use abbreviations of this kind was most marked in totalitarian countries and totalitarian organizations” (310). The truncation was used as a method of controlling subordinates within totalitarian regimes, and this is a parallel between the world in *Nineteen Eighty-Four* and the world that George Orwell lived in while writing the novel. Although it is
apparent that Newspeak uses this technique intentionally for manipulative purposes, he describes this process as mostly instinctual when it comes to the aforementioned totalitarian organizations. An example that he gives is the word “Nazi,” which is the colloquial truncation of “nationalsozialismus” in German or “national socialism” in English. From 1936 to 1946, the term “Nazi” was used eight times more often than “national socialist” in English literature, and in German literature, the word “Nazi” was used almost fifteen times more in 1946 than it was ten years prior (“Google Ngram Viewer”). Orwell continues to say, “in thus abbreviating a name one narrowed and subtly altered its meaning, by cutting out most of the associations that would otherwise cling to it” (310). This rhetorical shift resultantly eliminated connotations attached to the original definition and seemed to allow for its presentation as something new; however, in reality, the convoluted moniker illustrates a completely original image that the Nazis wanted to project, which masked their true political intentions. The foundational goal of the party was to develop an unblemished society by identifying and eliminating Jews, non-whites, the intellectually disabled, homosexuals, and other non-Germans through brute-force governance and media control. The abbreviation allowed them to maintain the image that the full name suggests, but still stray away from the party to a point of unrecognizability. By having the true intentions of the party hide behind the portmanteau, which possesses no prejudicial connotations, the truncation could have played a role in the widespread following of Nazism and the aggressively successful political indoctrination. It is easier for an individual to support a group without attached biases even if it has similar or more egregious intentions.

The Language of the Third Reich

In the early 1940s, a few years before Orwell began to write Nineteen Eighty-Four, Victor Klemperer, a romance language scholar and professor, wrote a diary about his experiences as a Jewish man living in Nazi Germany. In his diary, titled I Will Bear Witness, he argues that in order to eradicate the Nazi power, “It isn’t only Nazi actions that [have] to vanish, but also the Nazi cast of mind, the typical Nazi way of thinking, and its breeding ground: the language of Nazism.” According to Klemperer, language was the foundation for implementing large-scale Nazi conditioning techniques, and it was the hatchery for the Nazi ideologies that initiated the Holocaust. After years of seeing how the Nazis utilized propaganda and language, Klemperer began to see the types of rhetoric used to maintain power: “The basic principle of the whole language of the Third Reich became apparent to me: a bad conscience; its triad: defending oneself, praising oneself, accusing – never a moment of calm testimony” (“I Will Bear Witness”). The language of the Third Reich is accusatory, condescending, and above all else, self-promoting.

The language of the Third Reich mirrors how Newspeak functions in Nineteen Eighty-Four and furthers the parallels between Oceania and Nazi Germany. One example is of a semantic shift in the word “organisieren,” which was originally translated to mean organizing an event or to arrange something in a particular order. In A New German-English dictionary for General Use Containing an Exhaustive Vocabulary of the Colloquial and Literary English and German Languages, as Well as a Great Many Scientific, Technical and Commercial Terms and Phrases and Preceded by a Study of the German Pronunciation by F.C. Hebert and L. Hirsch, which was published in 1926,
the word “organisieren” directly translates to the English word “organize” (517). However, roughly ten years later, Nazism really began to take form under the dictatorial power of Adolf Hitler, and the language of the Third Reich really began to materialize, and the word began to be used differently. According to Klemperer, the Nazi party altered the meaning of the word and spun it in a way that attached a bias to it. This is the opposite of what the Inner Party does with the B words, but it is just as effective as a rhetorical modification. However, it slowly discredited other synonyms which mirrors the abolishment of vocabulary words that occurred during the transition into Newspeak. “Organisieren” came to replace words meaning “to work”, “to carry out”, “to do”, or “to make”. In Robert Michael and Karin Doerr’s Nazi-Deutsch/Nazi-German: An English Lexicon of the Language of the Third Reich the definition of the word “organisieren” is “meaning to procure items that were only available through connections. In soldiers’ slang, to steal; in concentration camps, to find or trade for material to survive” (305). For the Nazi soldiers who were attempting to control and exterminate Jewish people, they used the word to mean larceny or theft; however, the Jews used it to mean the acquiring of a material in order for survival. This definition sets up a contrast between not only how the word was used by the aggressor and the oppressed, but it also shows how language connotation was used to twist the truth.

Language is slippery because connotations attach to them and give words more than one definition. The Nazi language is no exception. In this particular instance, the soldier definition frames the actions of those in concentration camps as criminal, when in reality the soldiers themselves are pawns to a brute-force regime who rendered survival difficult within the confines of concentrations camps. Klemperer continues on to say that this semantic modification, replaced the phrase “buying tobacco” with “organizing tobacco,” which adds a level of criminal suspicion to a previously innocent word (“Language Does Not Lie”). If a harmless act is framed as illicit to both those who are doing the action and those who enforce the law, the action ideally will be punished frequently and committed less often.

In German, the word for winding a watch or winding up a mechanical toy was “aufziehen”. However, during the 1930s and 1940s, the word became a way to describe the organization of large political demonstrations for the Nazi party (“Language Does Not Lie”). These demonstrations attracted massive crowds and they were intended to show the connection between the people of Germany and the growing Nazi party (Michael and Doerr 79). In Heinrich Hoffman’s picture titled “Hitler at a Nazi Party Rally,” Hoffman was able to capture the kind of synchronized spectacle that these political demonstrations were (see Figure 1). The picture depicts a crowd of people so large that they do not fit within the frame of the picture, and a perfectly aligned parting of the crowd so Adolf Hitler could march through. Hitler is leading the march and the path is guided by a chain of flowers, which shows the devout respect that the party had for their Fuhrer. The organization and solemnity is apparent by the neat rows, the matching uniforms, the coordinated swastika flags, and the general lack of disorder. The picture is able to highlight the demonstration’s parallellization to clockwork and the movements of a wind-up toy. The Nazis and the German people were organized in a manner that presented both assertive unison and ventriloquist-like
control. The change in the word eliminated its original definition and replaced it with a meaning that had immediate ties to the power and togetherness of the Nazi party.

This is an ideology that a totalitarian group, who is thirsty for manipulation and participation, would want to instill in possible supporters.

(Figure 1: “Hitler at a Nazi Party Rally” by Heinrich Hoffman)

Language, in its most basic form, is nothing more than a structured series of symbols that are used for communication and changing the meaning of a word is the same as transforming the symbolization of a logo. When a symbol is used, what the symbol represents outweighs exactly what the symbol is because it elicits a response from the receiver. An example of the representation shift of a logo is how Hitler used the swastika during the early 1940s, compared to how it was used five millennia before Hitler’s reign. The word stems from the Sanskrit word “svastika,” which was used in Neolithic Eurasia and by Hindus, Buddhists, and Jains to symbolize auspiciousness and prosperity. During the late 1800s, German archaeologist Heinrich Schliemann believed the symbol to be an emblem from distant German ancestors, and the connection between the German people and their genial connection to the Aryan race led to the adoption of the swastika during the early twentieth century as the head character of far-right nationalist parties. The United States Holocaust Memorial Museum website states, “By the time the Nazis gained control of Germany, the connotations of the swastika had forever changed,” and the symbol eventually became a representative of extreme nationalism and aggressive anti-Semitism.
(“History of the Swastika”). The Inner Party alters the meaning of words and phrases intentionally to either limit thought or unavoidably incept the party’s ideologies. Similarly, the Nazi party took a symbol that is recognizable as a religious and civil representation of well-being and smothered it with their extremist intentions.

“Gleichschaltung” initially meant to synchronize or bring into line; however, after the appointment of Hitler as the Chancellor of Germany, the definition was altered to pertain strictly to Nazi party ideologies. The definition reads, “All of the German…social, political, and cultural organization are run according to Nazi ideology and policy. All opposition to be eliminated” (Michael and Doerr 192).

Klemperer noted that the word became the legal measure from which the German government allowed Hitler and his Nazi party to take control of all aspects of German life. The mission was to eliminate individualism by promoting Nazism to the entire population through education and propaganda. It simultaneously scouted prospective Nazis and eliminated party threats, which led to the creation of a regime comprised of mindless automatons. The word shifted from meaning synchronization to forceful Nazi coordination.

Just like the word “free” in Newspeak, the definitions for these words were truncated. Except, instead of doing this to eliminate ideas, they were used to narrow the focus of ideas. All of these common words lost their original meanings and took on forms that limited them to the growing Nazi enterprise. The way these words could be used were limited just to keep the taste of Nazism in the speaker’s mouth and attempt to diminish remaining traces of intellectual freedom and individuality. Klemperer wrote, “[The language of the Third Reich] truly encompassed and contaminated the whole of Greater Germany in its absolute conformity.” This conformity led to a lack of individualism, which led to the control of the people’s actions and perceptions, just like they do in Nineteen Eighty-Four. It led to a blind following where morals were set aside, and values were contaminated. He continued, “A word is new at the moment where it emerges as an expression of a new way of thinking or a new idea. ‘Sippe’ and ‘Untermensch’ are indeed original creations of the language of the Third Reich” (“Language Does Not Lie”). Similar to the construed language of Newspeak, the language of the Third Reich did not exactly invent new words. Instead, the Nazis transformed the words into something new by altering their definition or narrowing the number of definitions in a way that suits the Nazis’ cause. “Sippe” and “Untermensch” are prime examples of how language is used to indoctrinate thought.

“Sippe,” an old word from the middle ages had the original meaning of kinship and family. It basically meant the togetherness or intimate relationship of those connected by a bloodline. However, the word eventually belonged exclusively to those of the “German-Aryan-Nordic race” (Michael and Doerr 374). Family and bloodline no longer referred to a clanship unit; instead, it only pertained to those who the Nazis viewed as superior. “Untermensch” is similar in the sense that it represented anyone who was not Aryan to be inferior. The word literally translates to “subhuman,” and the dictionary states that it referred to “non-Aryans such as Jews, Poles, Russians, Serbs, Sinti-Romani, and Bolsheviks. Among the non-Aryans, the Jews were held to be the most dangerous group, the children of darkness, and the only true rivals of the Aryans, the children of light. The other non-Aryans were to serve as slaves to the Reich”
(Michael and Doerr 408). While “Sippe” excluded non-Aryans from being a part of the German nationalist bloodline, “Untermensch” classified them as unworthy of being considered human.

The words were used by the Reich to develop a clear binary between Aryans and non-Aryans. A 1942 Race and Settlement head office pamphlet stated that the “hands, feet and a kind of brain, with eyes and mouth” are the only way that non-Aryans were biologically related to the master race, and that the Jews are nothing more than a creature that shares a similar face to the Aryans. The pamphlet continued to say, “For all that bear a human face are not equal,” which projects the subhuman treatment of Non-Aryans as justifiable on a completely biological level (Michael and Doerr 408). The language used in this pamphlet demonstrates how language is used in Nazi Germany to portray and promote a particular ideology: an ideology that feeds off of fear and instills hate within its constituents.

Conclusion

Although Orwell placed the novel in the future, he was satirizing what is going on in his world. Although authorial intent may not seem immediately important, it actually provides a portal for readers to divulge into a past culture. Fiction is sometimes more telling than nonfiction and can act as the best source for exploring not just the events of history, but the mindsets and ideologies that existed. This is part of the persuasive and informative power of language; however, this is not at all the extent of language’s power.

Language has the power to influence people beyond extrinsic motivation and the immediate connotation of communication. Culture, belief, perception, and even thought is affected by the language that one is exposed to. Language curtailing in the early twentieth century utilized linguistic determinism in an attempt to maintain control over the thought of its people. However, contemporary societies are seeing the rise of panoptic and limited languages, and the translating of classic literature. With all of this occurring now, who is to say that we are not experiencing the formation of another manipulative, controlling machine? Perhaps one that is not totalitarian but still degrades history and ignores fact. In a society where “fake news”, “alternative facts”, and “No Fear Shakespeare” have a growingly dominant presence, there is no saying where it all stops. It is important to pay attention to the historical factors that inspired Orwell to write, instead of simply reading it as a predictive text.

When it comes to how people perceive and interact with their world, language is a primary stakeholder. It can alter the way individuals see color, and it can even aid in the rationalization of a genocide. If language has the ability to limit thought and alter perception, then there is no doubting that the pen is mightier than the sword. Furthermore, if language has the capability of brainwashing hundreds of thousands of people and enacting a holocaust that nearly wipes out an entire population, then there is no telling just how powerful the pen can be.

References


“History of the Swastika.” United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, United States Holocaust Memorial Museum.


