

1984: Newspeak

The Party and language: Newspeak

What the Party is doing to language is an important theme in Nineteen Eighty-Four. In most languages, new words are constantly added, but in Newspeak, the language of Oceania, words are being destroyed.

Syme is a specialist in Newspeak and is one of a team engaged in putting together the Eleventh Edition of the Newspeak Dictionary. He tells Winston in the canteen how the team is cutting "language down to the bone" (pages 39-41). He explains to Winston how words like "bad", "excellent" and "splendid" will disappear, being replaced by variations on the word "good"; such as "ungood", for "bad", "plusgood" for "excellent" and "doubleplusgood" for "splendid".

The Party is using Newspeak to limit the way people think, because, without words, there is no way to express thought. Without words, people in Oceania will not commit thoughtcrime and so cannot rebel against the Party. The Party will have complete control of people's minds.

The Party will destroy the literature of the past in the form it was written. For example, Shakespeare's plays will be re-written in Newspeak so that they will carry whatever message the Party wants to give. This is a good example of the Party's slogan: "Who controls the past controls the future: who controls the present controls the past" (page 26).

The Newspeak Principles

Orwell outlines The Principles of Newspeak in the Appendix (pages 231-41). This deals, at much greater length, with what Syme has told Winston in the canteen.

There were three sets of vocabulary: the A vocabulary, the B vocabulary, and the C vocabulary.

The A vocabulary

The A vocabulary was used for "the business of everyday life", such as getting dressed and going from place to place.

Nouns and verbs were identical in form, so that "cut" disappeared, and "knife" became the one word meaning "knife" (the tool that cuts), and the act of cutting: so "The knives knife the cake".

Adjectives were formed by adding -ful to the noun-verb, so that "knifeful" took the place of "sharp".

Adverbs were formed by adding -wise to the noun-verb, so that "knifewise" took the place of "sharply".

Words were made negative by adding un- to the beginning of a word; for example, "uncold" replaced "warm". They were made positive by adding plus or doubleplus to the beginning of a word, such as "good" to replace "very good", "excellent" and "splendid".

Verbs formed their past tense by adding -ed. So, "scraped" would remain the past tense of "scrape", but the past tense of "think" became "thinked", and "spoke" became "speaked".

Plurals of nouns were made by adding -s or -es. For example, "Telescreens" remained "telescreens", but "men" became "mans" and "women" "womans".

The B vocabulary

The B vocabulary was made up of words which had political purposes intended to make people respond as the Party wanted them to.

The B vocabulary contained two words joined together to make a "noun-verb", for example, "prolefeed" meaning "rubbishy entertainment"; and "sexcrime" meaning any kind of sexual misbehaviour, including sex between people enjoying the act for its own sake (like Julia).

Many words did not exist in Newspeak because the Party had removed the living conditions they described. So words like "free", "justice", "God" and "religion" had vanished.

The names of the Ministries and Departments were shortened, so the Ministry of Truth was known as Minitrue, and the Fiction Department Ficdep. The purpose behind these shortenings was to remove any of the old associations a word like "truth" might have, truth in the old sense suggesting honesty, justice, and truths that the present American Constitution might consider self-evident.

The C vocabulary

The C vocabulary consisted only of scientific and technical terms almost never used in everyday speech.

Newspeak was a central way of controlling the minds of Party members and making Thoughtcrime (thinking thoughts against the Party) impossible. The Party's aim, after all, was to keep power for ever.

Activities

- 1 Write down as many words as you can that you think could be replaced by "ungood", "plusgood" and "doubleplusgood".
- 2 Write out O'Brien's Newspeak message (page 130) in modern English.
- 3 You have just returned to your classroom after taking part in the Two Minutes Hate. Write a short letter, in Newspeak, to a friend describing your feelings.