Orwellian Doublespeak: Dialogicality and the English Language

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The English writer George Orwell is often credited with uncannily accurate prophetic powers, so much so *that the adjective "Orwellian" may (ironically) refer to that predicted dystopian future through which we are presently living* (McKenna, 2019). Various terms drawn from Orwell's novel "1984"—including "Big Brother", "Thought Police", "Two Minutes Hate", "Room 101", "memory hole", "Newspeak", "doublethink", "unperson" and "thoughtcrime"—have also entered the popular lexicon. But perhaps the most striking illustration of the political tendency to abuse language appears in the incongruous fictitious slogan WAR IS PEACE. SLAVERY IS FREEDOM. IGNORANCE IS STRENGTH.

In his famous 1946 essay *Politics and the English Language* (Orwell, 1946), which has since become a "required text" (Pinsker, 1997) in the essay canon (Bloom, 1999), Orwell asserts that "all issues are political issues, and politics itself is a mass of lies, evasions, folly, hatred and schizophrenia". To his list of contemporaneous terms that suffer from political "abuse"[1], he adduces the term "science". It is interesting to consider what Orwell would have made of the common present-day usage of this word that employs the definite article ("the science"), often prefaced with imperative verbs such as "trust", "listen to" or "believe in"[2], to imply something that is established as beyond appropriate criticism.

In a previous work, we examined the extent to which English functions as an "interlingua" to facilitate scientific communication, as well as some senses in which it can be criticised as promoting linguistic imperialism (Popova & Beavitt, 2017). In subsequent works, we considered three sociological aspects of the phenomenon of science (Popova et al., 2018) and discussed usages of the English article system from the perspective of Russian scientific

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[1] "fascist", "democracy", "socialism", "freedom", "patriotic", "realistic", "justice", "class", "totalitarian", "science", "progressive", "reactionary", "bourgeois", "equality"

[2] Google ngram search, retrieved 27-09-2011

communication, which is increasingly conducted in the English language (Beavitt & Popova, 2020) indefinite- and definite articles in English. While existing pedagogical approaches are successfully used to teach near-native competency in the use of English articles, the final stage of native-equivalent competency continues to evade even advanced ESL/EAP students, especially those whose first language (e.g., Russian). While some of these usages appear to be both rhetorical and covert, we also drew attention to the many ways in which the English article system can function to enhance the dialogicality of a text.

In order to validate or reject the ironic usage of the term "Orwellian" as applied in the context of contemporary English language scientific communication, the following research question arises: Are we currently living in an Orwellian dystopia? If so, what role does language—in particular, the English language—play in how this dystopia is unfolding?

Aiming his invective at the "abuse of language" based on the erroneous belief (perhaps traceable to Analytic philosophy) that "language is a natural growth and not an instrument which we shape for our own purposes", Orwell pithily observes that

> A man may take to drink because he feels himself to be a failure, and then fail all the more completely because he drinks. It is rather the same thing that is happening to the English language. It becomes ugly and inaccurate because our thoughts are foolish, but the slovenliness of our language makes it easier for us to have foolish thoughts. (Orwell, 1946)

In his much-cited critique of Orwell's essay, Carl Freedman refers to the "seductive" implication that "compositional pedagogy can be a purely technical and ideologically neutral task", i.e., a simple matter of "teaching the student how best to express his or her thoughts on any given topic". For him, such an "intuitively false" assumption would rest on a "naively empiricist view of language as a wholly passive, unstructured material which can be cut, like so many yards of cloth, to fit […] any pre-given and presumably non-linguistic thought" (Freedman, 1981).

Objecting to the "predictable" and "dreary" insertion of "whose" (e.g., "whose science?") before every hegemonic "value word", Sanford Pinsker also worries that "clear writing" has come to be seen as an "academic liability rather than as an asset". He reports the concern raised by students that, if it is "too clear", their writing will risk being dismissed as "under-theorised" (Pinsker, 1997).

Why do people write? Orwell seems to have a clear idea why *he* writes, but he does not explicitly address the problem in his essay. Perhaps it is to propagandise a certain political position? In any case, for him, writing seems to have something to do with "having something to say". Maybe he even feels that good writing will have the effect of "making the world a better place"?

In his 2015 Orwell memorial lecture, the English theologian Rowan Williams discusses Orwell's now "familiar" rules for good writing: avoid "secondhand metaphors", use short words where possible, abbreviate, use the active voice in preference to the passive, and avoid using "foreign" phrases where a common English alternative

exists (Williams, 2015). According to Williams, following these rules can help a writer to communicate something other than that he or she is "powerful enough to say what he or she likes", while breaking them may constitute "ways of avoiding communication" on the part of those who "do not want to be replied to or argued with". In particular, Williams endorses Orwell's injunction against "bad or confused metaphor", since such expressions are intended to "conceal or ignore" in order to "shrink the limits of the world to what can be dealt with in the speaker's terms alone". Good metaphor, conversely, "presents us with something we can't visualise" in order to increase "awareness, in unexpected ways, of what we see or sense" (Williams, 2015).

Thus, for Williams, the essential criterion concerns whether a writer's language "invites response". In envisaging good writing as an essentially dialogical process, involving rather than excluding the reader, Williams nevertheless remarks that a writer "sometimes has to be difficult"; thus, it becomes necessary to distinguish between "necessary or salutary difficulty" and the "self-serving obfuscation" that Orwell identifies as a "tool of power". In the light of justifiable "scepticism about anything that looks like complexity for its own sake" and "feeling that it ought to be possible to say things straightforwardly" (Williams, 2015), such necessary or salutary difficulty can also be seen in terms of a challenge issued to the reader to create their own synthesis.

Therefore, in order to write more dialogically, with the aim of including rather than excluding readers, how reliable are Orwell's "rules"?

Orwell's ironic objection to the use of ready-made phrases, which "perform the *important* [emphasis added] service of partially concealing your meaning even from yourself", appears not to take into account that such collocations, like the words that make them up, have specific meanings in different discourse contexts. Moreover, when English is used as a second language (ESL), a different consideration emerges, since acquiring fluency in a language is highly dependent on the ability to memorise and appropriately turn recognisable phrases (Wray, 2007). Considered from a wider educational perspective, then, one possible reason for writing in a particular language might be in order to provide "authentic" material for those who set out to "learn" that language, i.e., participate in its discourses. If an L2 reader "hears the author's voice" (a possible criterion for dialogical writing) in the form of an "internal" dialogue, they is already well on the way to L2 fluency. For ESL users, the admonition against using "foreign" words and phrases also seems less applicable, since the primary aim here is to maximise one's comprehensibility to an interlocutor, who may also be an ESL user, rather than conform to some supposed autochthonous linguistic purity asserted on the part of "English". In such cases, using words derived from e.g., Latin and Greek roots that may be common to a reader's L1 and L2 may be less excluding, i.e., more dialogical.

Orwell's admonition to avoid using the passive voice can also be legitimately criticised, not least since over 20 percent of Orwell's sentences in this essay are constructed in this way. Although he readily admits that he commits "the very faults I am protesting against", this does not inspire confidence in the infallibility of the rules he sets out. While usages of the passive voice have indeed tended to decline since 1946, accompanied by an increase in the use of first-person pronouns (Banks,

2017), this decline is by no means terminal. Besides, while writers admittedly tend to use the passive voice when they don't want to name the actor of the verb, such concealments are not always dishonest. For example, in scientific writing, it may be more dialogical to invite a reader to participate in an attitude that "it is known…" rather than baldly state that "we (scientists) know…".

In his recent Spectator review of UK Labour party leader Keir Starmer's blandly designated pamphlet "The Road Ahead" (Starmer, 2021), Sam Leith's criticisms were encapsulated in the title: "Keir Starmer's essay is a cliché-ridden disaster" (Leith, 2021). Noting that we live "in an attention economy", in which readers' attention is at a premium, Leith criticises the "quite inordinate length" of Starmer's "pieties, bromides and abstractions", comprising "a groaning tumbril of dead metaphors trundling along the slow road to nowhere". Prodding several of these metaphors to confirm that they are indeed dead, Leith channels Orwell to show that these constitute examples of "writing that isn't paying attention to what it's saying", i.e., excluding the reader by undervaluing his or her attention.

For George Trail, Orwell's rhetorical approach is based on compelling a reader's participation, i.e., involving him or her "as an active and engaged consumer of the essay" (Trail, 1995). The brief analysis presented in the present review would suggest that the author achieves this as much by creatively breaking his own rules as by obeying them. Indeed, since dialogicality by no means implies agreement, it may be observed that Orwell breaks his own rules as part of a strategy to achieve more active reader participation in the dialogue presented by his text.

In scientific writing based on empirical research, a key function of the text is to describe the "laboratory" or experimental setup in sufficient detail to allow a reader to repeat the experiment in order to verify the results (and conclusions) for them. Here, while accuracy is paramount, it makes little difference whether active ("We placed the samples in sterilised petri dishes") or passive ("The samples were placed in sterilised petri dishes") constructions are used. In discussions of obtained results, on the other hand, a more dialogical strategy may involve the reader using an active construction with "we" ("We can see from the data presented in the table that…"). However, if what follows from "that" is not what the reader "sees" through his or her own interpretive lens, prompting him or her to repeat the experiment under similar conditions to those earlier described, then the text will have fulfilled its dialogical purpose.

In conclusion, while one encounters many ironically rhetorical usages of the term "Orwellian" to refer to *that predicted dystopian future through which we are presently living*, such uses should not be taken "literally". Readers may experience various emotions when presented with texts that invite their dialogical participation, not all of which are necessarily experienced as "positive". In extreme cases, dialogicality may even result in the overturning of a scientific paradigm or collapse of a political consensus. Conversely, non-dialogical texts, which exclude a reader by demanding his or her a priori "agreement", imply the eventual redundancy of the human author, to be replaced by machines spewing out incontrovertible "facts". Dear reader, if I have managed to hold your valuable attention as far as this conclusion, I trust you will "agree" that the latter would constitute a perfect example of an "Orwellian dystopia".

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