GEORGE ORWELL'S THEORY OF LANGUAGE

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Introduction

Whatever other advances it has made, academic linguistics has not taken any account of these Orwellian insights. But there is no reason in principle why linguistics should not make a systematic study of the relations Orwell was concerned with, social structure and linguistic form, function and process, using linguistic analysis as a way of uncovering ideological processes and complex states of mind. Such a linguistics would be of direct value in a critical account of contemporary culture.

Bob Hodge and Roger Fowler. "Orwellian Linguistics"

The quote above is taken from the collective monograph *Language and Control* (Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1979) and is a good starting point for my book. It is an amazing fact that among hundreds of books about Orwell there is not a single one about "Orwellian linguistics,"[1] as Hodge and Fowler phrase it. And "hundreds" is not a figure of speech: when the first bibliography of criticism on Orwell was published in 1977[2], it registered 500 items—books, articles, and important reviews (excluding newspaper articles, most book reviews, and dissertations).

It is only natural that the year of 1984 marked a new burst of interest in Orwell; this was the year of Orwellian conferences, such as *Reflections on America, 1984: An Orwell Symposium* (The University of Georgia Press), *George Orwell and Nineteen Eighty-Four: The Man and The Book*, held at the Library of Congress, and *The Future of "Nineteen Eighty-Four"* (Ann Arbor, The University of Michigan Press). The scope of research presented at these conferences is impressive, but again, only one presentation among all of them, "George Orwell and the English Language," by Richard W.

Bailey, touched upon Orwell's views on language, though the main focus of the presentation is, as we are told in the beginning, to analyze "the role of language in forming our ideology and shaping our ethical behavior."[3]

Publications continued through the 1980s and 1990s: new biographies,[4] new interpretations of *1984*,[5] publications of unknown writings of Orwell,[6] and new editions of Orwell's text,[7] including the tremendous undertaking of Peter Davison, who edited the complete works of George Orwell.[8] In 1998 the first bibliography of Orwell, compiled by Gillian Fenwick, was published, which includes a section with books and articles about Orwell and his writing[9] but practically no work that attempts to analyze Orwell's ideas about language.[10]

I have to correct myself: I have been able to find three books which to some extent and for different purposes touch upon the problem of the views of Orwell on the language. Incidentally, one of these books was written by Roger Fowler, who co-authored the essay *Orwellian Linguistics*. But let me discuss these exemptions to the general rule in chronological order.

1. Whitney French Bolton, *The Language of 1984: Orwell's English and Ours* (The University of Tennessee Press, 1984). As the title suggests, the focus of the book is on the language of Orwell himself: "The book has a double perspective: a telephoto close-up that studies Orwell's English and a wide-angle panorama of English today."[11] Of course, one cannot speak about Orwell's language without touching upon his views on language, so the book starts with the chapter, "Theory of Language," the basic idea of which is that Orwell was a poor linguist: "He did not test the linguistic hearsay of his time and social class against the rigor of any theory or even any systematic study."[12] This is a typical attitude of a professional to a layperson who dared to intrude into the former's field without "any systematic study." Thus, Bolton makes it clear that he does not consider any of Orwell's linguistic ideas worth discussing: "Orwell's achievement was that of a social critic and a man of letters. He is not well-served, or best understood, by admiration of him as a prophet, a linguistics sage, an abstract thinker, or

a tragic hero."[13] I am not in a position to contend with his statements about the prophet and hero, but as far as linguistics is concerned I believe Mr. Bolton is wrong. No one is going to make Orwell a sage, but I hope to show that he did suggest an original theory of the language.

2. John Wesley Young, *Totalitarian Language: Orwell's Newspeak and its Nazi and Communist Antecedents* (University Press of Virginia, 1991). This is a marvelously done book. For the first time, it provides a full-length study of both Nazi and Communist discourse, and it is the only book that comes close to the focus of my own research. In his book, Young juxtaposes Newspeak and examples of Nazi or Communist diction to show that the "Orwellian model" really had its antecedents in Nazi German and Communist Russian, thus coming to the conclusion that Orwell's model was correct. At the same time, three out of six characteristics of what Young calls the "Orwellian Model of Totalitarian Language" are characteristics of the society, not of the language (intent of the rulers to control thought and behavior, exaltation of the state over the individual, violence and vilification).Thus, the focus of the book is on *totalitarian society and what it does to the language it uses*, and to what extent it coincides with Orwell's *1984*. This is how the author himself describes the questions raised in his book: "Did Orwell exaggerate the extent of linguistic corruption in totalitarian societies? Are words as potent an instrument of control as he supposed? Is his characterization of totalitarian language in *Nineteen Eighty-Four* a valid one? If so, does it apply to in any way to democratic governments?"[14]

The purpose of my book, on the other hand, is to describe Orwell's hypothesis about the language (Newspeak being only one piece of the mosaic) and to show two things: (1) this theory is proved by facts from different languages, no matter what type of society uses this or that language, and (2) Orwell was right not only in his hypothesis about language, but also in his suggestions for reforming the language. My analysis is done exclusively within linguistic framework, and I cannot—and do not wish to—provide any societal facts or conclusions.

3. Roger Fowler, *The Language of George Orwell* (St. Martin's Press, 1995). The book's topic is very precisely formulated in the title: Fowler sees his goal "to show, through detailed analysis of his language, how he [Orwell] evolved the distinctive "Orwellian voice."[15] So it is only natural that he also includes a chapter "Orwell's Views on Language." But reading this chapter leaves one disappointed. Even though Fowler is not as condescending to Orwell as Bolton, his analysis is intended to show that such a thing as Orwell's theory of language does not exist. Rather surprisingly for a linguist who back in 1979 argued the necessity for linguistics to produce a systematic study of Orwell's view on language, in his new book Fowler concludes that "Orwell approaches the subject of language and social class as an amateur, but as an involved amateur, curious and intelligently speculative, yet moved, embarrassed, and often angry,"[16] whose beliefs were "contrary to mainstream linguistics since Saussure."[17] On the other hand, since the purpose of the book is analysis of Orwell's style, it may be only natural that the language views of Orwell himself are discussed in passim and without any important discoveries or conclusions.

Thus, to the best of my knowledge, there is not a single book that attempts to analyze Orwell's views on the language—that is, really tries to implement the idea to undertake "the systemic study of relations Orwell was concerned with."[18] That is why the conclusion that "Orwellian linguistics does not exist,"[19] made in 1979, to a large extent is still true today. It is the belief that it should exist that has been the starting point for my book.

* * *

The structure of the book is determined by its overall goal. The introductory chapter gives a brief summary of research on Orwell and deals with the few authors who to a certain extent touch upon Orwell's views on language. Chapter 1 analyzes predecessors of Orwell, the three persons—a writer, a linguist, and an economist—whose ideas, I believe, influenced

Orwell' views on language. Chapters 2 attempts to put together the pieces of Orwell's language puzzle, scattered throughout his essays, diaries, letters, radio talks, and fiction, and describes his views on pronunciation, vocabulary, grammar, and spelling. Chapter 3 proposes the Newspeak model as Orwell's way to formulate his theory, while chapter 4 tests this theory with the material of three languages—English, German, and Russian. Chapter 5, followed by the conclusion and bibliography, sums up Orwell's hypothesis and analyzes bias-free language as an implementation of Orwell's ideas.

NOTES

1. "Orwellian" is too loaded a word in modern English to be used as a term; that is why in my book I try to avoid it and substitute it with "Orwell's hypothesis" or "Orwell's theory of language."
2. Jeffrey and Valerie Meyers, *George Orwell: an annotated bibliography of criticism.* New York: Garland Pub., 1977.
3. Richard W. Bailey, "George Orwell and the English Language," in *The Future of Nineteen Eighty-Four,* Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 24.
4. For example, Michael Shelden, *Orwell: The Authorized Biography (*HarperCollins, 1991); Jeffrey Meyers, *Orwell: Wintry Conscience of a Generation* (New York/London: W.W.Norton & Company, 2000)
5. For example, Irving Howe (editor), *1984 Revisited* (New York: Harper & Row, 1983); *George Orwell: A Reassessment* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1988)
6. For example, William J.West (editor), *Orwell: The Lost Writings* (New York: Arbor House, 1985); William J.West (editor), *Orwell: The War Commentaries* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1985).
7. For example, new edition of *The Collected Essays, Journalism and Letters of George Orwell*, 4 volumes (Boston: David R. Godine, 2000).
8. *The Complete Works of George Orwell*, 20 volumes. Secker and Warburg, 1998.
9. Gillian Fenwick, *George Orwell: A Bibliography*. (Winchester, UK: St. Paul's Bibliographies; New Castle, Del. : Oak Knoll Press, 1998). This is a unique book: not only does it list everything that Orwell wrote, divided into sections (major books, contributions to books, contributions to periodicals, essay collections, radio broadcasts, published letters, published poems, unpublished materials) but it also gives a list of books and articles about Orwell and his writings.
10. I see no point in trying to list even the major works on Orwell: first of all, it will

take too much space, and second, there is no use in repeating what has been already done. The best sources of research on Orwell are the two above-mentioned books: the bibliography of criticism (1977) and Fenwick's bibliography of Orwell (1998). Besides, there is a very good bibliography of works on Orwell attached to the materials of the conference *George Orwell and Nineteen Eighty-Four*, held at the Library of Congress in 1984 (see *George Orwell and Nineteen Eighty-Four*, Library of Congress, Washington, 1985, 123-150.)

11. W.F.Bolton, *The Language of 1984. Orwell's English and Ours* (The University of Tennessee Press, 1984), 11.
12. Ibid., 40.
13. Ibid., 12.
14. John Wesley Young, *Totalitarian Language. Orwell's Newspeak and Its Nazi and Communist Antecedents* (Charlottsville and London: University of Virginia Press, 1991), 4. Curiously enough, Young also criticizes Bolton's attitude to Orwell, saying that in his book Bolton "is far less concerned with the language of *1984* than with exposing Orwell's lack of linguistic credentials." (11)
15. Roger Fowler, *The Language of George Orwell* (New York: St.Martin's Press, 1995), vii.
16. Ibid., 20.
17. Ibid., 33.
18. Bob Hodge and Roger Fowler, "Orwellian Linguistics," in *Language and Control* (London, Boston and Henley: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1979), 25.
19. Ibid., 22.

1. Predecessors of Orwell: Logical and Historical [1]

But what I have most at heart is, that some method should be thought on for ascertaining and fixing our language for ever, after such alterations are made in it as shall be thought requisite.

Jonathan Swift

The only improvement you [Charles Ogden] offer over natural English is a restriction and limitation of vocabulary, which is no improvement at all, for the language of the future needs an abundant word-stock capable of taking care of all the needs of civilized living.

Mario Pei

I am very much interested in the question of Basic English. The widespread use of this would be a gain to us much more fruitful than the annexation of great provinces.

Winston Churchill

Few traits of totalitarian regimes are at the same time so confusing to the superficial observer and yet so characteristic of the whole intellectual climate as the complete perversion of language, the change of meaning of words by which the ideals of the new regimes are expressed.

Freidrich von Hayek

I. Jonathan Swift and the Language of the Houyhnhnms

Swift was, as Orwell himself said many times, one of his favorite writers, and *Gulliver's Travels* was one of his favorite books.[2] More than that, Orwell considered *Gulliver's Travels* one of the best books ever written: "If I had to make a list of six books which were to be preserved when all others were to be destroyed, I would certainly put *Gulliver's Travels* among them."[3] A little-known fact that proves Orwell's admiration of Swift is that during his time at BBC, Orwell staged an imaginary interview with this author.[4]

What in Swift's book attracted Orwell? To answer this question, let us look at Orwell's review of *Gulliver's Travels*, *Politics vs. Literature*, published in 1946,[5] as well as at Swift's text itself.

Two of Swift's ideas seem especially important to Orwell: the rewriting of history and the society of the Houyhnhnms and their language. For the purpose of this analysis rewriting of history by "prostitute writers," as Swift puts it, is of less importance now: although this practice was unfortunately too well known to Orwell from his own experience during the war in Spain, it did not contribute anything special to his views on language. Thus, we will deal with the language (and society—to the extent it depends on the language) of the Houyhnhnms.

From Orwell's review, it is evident that he was impressed with Swift's ideas and found them very modern. More than once Orwell calls them "totalitarian" while, of course, Swift never uses this term: "They have reached, in fact, the highest stage of totalitarian organization,"[6] "The totalitarian society of the Houyhnhnms, where there can be no freedom and no development…"[7]

What type of language does such a society use? We shall analyze the language of the Houyhnhnms using what I believe is a standard procedure used when analyzing any language: the structure (vocabulary, grammar, pronunciation) and

the functions of the language. We will try, as much as possible, to use the same scheme when analyzing other languages, both real and invented.

The Structure of the Language of the Houyhnhnms

Although the description of the language seems to take a substantial portion of Part IV of *Gulliver's Travels*, we learn surprisingly little about the language itself, because a large part of the description tells the reader what is *not* in this language. Still, we do learn some facts about it.

Pronunciation. The only thing we learn about phonetics is that "they pronounce through the nose and throat."[8]

Vocabulary. We also learn little about the words of this language. There are some examples, scattered through part IV, but they seem more like Swift's play with the term "Houyhnhnm" than anything else. Besides, since their talk sounded like neighing to Gulliver at first, it is evident that Swift's "examples" of words are really mere combinations of "hm", "hn", "hl", etc. Still, while reading we come across the following words:

Houyhnhnm ("the perfection of nature")
yahoo
hhuun (hurry)
hlunnh (oats)
gnnayh (bird of prey)
hnea yahoo (general name for diseases)
ylnhniamshy (aborigines)
lyhannh (a fowl)
lhnuwnh ("to retire to the first mother"—to die)
hnhloyan (exhortation)
hhnm yahoo (folly of a servant)
whnaholm yahoo (omission of a child)
ynlhmnawihlma yahoo (stone that cuts feet)
ynholmhnmrohlnw yahoo (ill contrived house)
nhuhnoh (an animal)

There is not much to learn from this vocabulary except the fact that those words were difficult to pronounce, and it took some time for Gulliver to master the pronunciation.

We do learn much more about this language by learning what was not there than what was. First of all, there are fewer words than in English: "…their language doth not abound in variety of words, because their wants and passions are fewer than among us."[9] "Power, government, war, law, punishment, and a thousand other things had no terms, wherein that Language could express them."[10] "Courtship, love, presents, joyntures, settlements, have no place in their thoughts; or terms whereby to express them in their language."[11]

Thus, since their society is governed by "reason," there is a direct correlation between the scope of this reason and the scope of the language. Many notions common to us are entirely missing, and so are the words. For example, there is no concept of compulsion and consequently there is no verb "to compel." The reason this and many other notions are totally missing is that there is no compulsion in their society. Thus, in the "triangle of reference"[12] all three corners are missing: the symbol, the thought or reference, and the referent. As a result, Gulliver has difficulty talking with his master, the noble horse, who let him stay at his house.

Orwell creates a parallel situation in *1984* with Newspeak. Since the number of words in this language is radically fewer than in English, anything written (or said, for that matter) in Standard English would be quite impossible to render in Newspeak. The famous quotation from the *Declaration of Independence*, as Orwell writes in the Appendix to his novel, is impossible to translate into Newspeak.[13]

Grammar. We learn still less about the morphology and syntax of Houyhnhnms' language. We do know that they use compound words, adding *yahoo* to words to get names of diseases and other evil things, but that is all we know. As for syntax, there is only one example of an actual sentence: *Hnuy illa nyha maiah Yahoo*, which means *Take care of thyself,*

gentle Yahoo. We cannot learn much from this example, even though the order of words seems to be English.

But that is not all. There are more and bigger exemptions from the language: "The Houyhnhnms have no letters, and consequently, their knowledge is all traditional."[14] As a result, they "have not the least idea of books or literature."[15]

So this is the "ideal" language (and "ideal" society) as Gulliver/Swift describes it to us. We get a pretty gloomy picture, since this is a society with a very limited number of concepts present in their "reason." Houyhnhnms know no feelings, there can be no disputes because they already know everything worth knowing, and consequently, their society knows no development. It is stuck in place and time, and for that reason they really neither need nor have a history, because there is nothing to pass over to new generations. It is only natural that their language fits this type of society perfectly. The limited number of words serves their limited worldview; and they really do not need writing.

Again, this is similar to the society in *1984*: although technically there is writing and history, in fact there is no history in the direct sense of the word—the objective record of historic events—and writing exists for completely different purposes.

The Functions of the Language of the Houyhnhnms

Without debating how many functions there are to language, let us assume for the sake of the present analysis that any human language has at least the following three basic functions:

Communicative. We use language to exchange ideas with each other. Of course, there are other means of communication (gestures used in everyday speech, sign language, various systems of codes, etc.) and in certain situations they are much more convenient than language—it would be quite difficult, for example, to shout from one ship to

another instead of using combinations of flags—but even so language has one big advantage over them all: it is the universal system of communication, while all others are useful for only specific situations.

Cognitive. We use language to learn about the outside world and to pass this learning to others, so that new generations can base their learning on the accomplishments of the previous generations, which we get as "free gifts from the dead," using Hayakawa's phrase.[16]

Emotional. Language, unlike other sign systems, expresses emotions. By words we can express our own feelings, as well as make others happy or sorry, sympathetic or angry.

Does the language of the Houyhnhnms actually have any of these functions? Since there are practically no emotions in the lives of the "noble horses," the third function is absent from their language. They do not feel joy, grief, love, or hatred—consequently, they do not need to express them.

The same is true about the cognitive function. Since they have nothing to pass to their children, this function is totally lacking in their language. Knowledge does not get accumulated, and an attentive reader like Orwell could not help noticing that "Swift's ideal beings are backward even in a mechanical sense."[17]

Finally, the first and evidently the original function of the language is present in a very narrowed fashion. Not only are their conversations dealing with "nothing but what was useful, expressed in the fewest and most significant words,"[18] but more surprisingly for us, "they have a notion, that when people are met together, a short silence doth improve conversation."[19] Thus not only do they have little to talk about, but *their idea of communication is to be silent.*

The language of the Houyhnhnms has lost (or more probably, never had) all the basic functions that make language what it is—the principal means of communication. Since any society cannot normally function without a language, it means that the society of the Houyhnhnms is dead as a society. This is exactly

the conclusion that Orwell arrives at in his review: "the 'Reason' by which they are governed is really a desire for death."[20]

It is important to include a final remark about Swift. When analyzing what Gulliver tells us about the language and society of the Houyhnhnms, it may be useful to keep in mind that Swift expresses his views of the English language in his famous essay *A Proposal for Correcting, Improving and Ascertaining the English Tongue*.[21] Comparing the two texts makes it possible to say that Gulliver, to some extent, is expressing Swift's own views about the language and the views that Swift believed to be true. He was very much dissatisfied with the state of English: "our language is extremely imperfect, its daily improvements are by no means in proportion to its daily corruptions, the intentions to polish and refine it have chiefly multiplied abuses and absurdities; and in many instances it offends against every part of grammar."[22] That is why Swift wished that "some method should be thought for ascertaining and fixing our language for ever."[23] This is also why Gulliver apologetically explains to the reader that it would be difficult to render his Houyhnhnm master's arguments "which must needs suffer by a translation into our barbarous English."[24] In other words, Swift believed that English was deteriorating and suggested a way to improve it. And while Orwell hardly would agree with Swift's idea of how to "fix" the language, he definitely felt the same way about the state of English in his own time.

2. Charles Ogden and Basic English

In 1920 the famous British linguist Charles Ogden, together with his colleague Ivor Richards, started to work on their famous book *The Meaning of Meaning*.[25] At a certain stage in their work, they noticed the following amazing fact: "We were comparing definitions—definitions of anything from a table to a force and from a rabbit to a concept—and we were struck by the fact that, whatever you were defining, certain words keep coming into definitions no matter how diverse the things you were

defining. This suggests that there might be a limited set of words in terms of which all other words might be stated."[26]

That was how Basic English started. (The name BASIC is derived from initial letters of the words British, American, Scientific, International, and Commercial. It has no connection with the computer language Basic, which appeared much later.) Ogden's idea was simple: he selected 850 words (the number of words that could be printed on one page) with which a person could make himself understood and speak within everyday topics. Ogden thought that this language could be used in two spheres: it could become an international assistant language and it could serve as the first stage in learning English by foreigners.

Basic grew very popular in the 1930s and 40s, judging by the number of manuals published in those years and, more importantly, by the number of books translated into Basic, starting with the Bible and including fairy tales, history books, scientific monographs, and periodicals.[27] Let us take a closer look at Basic English, in the same way we analyzed the language of the Houyhnhnms, and then analyze Orwell's attitude toward Basic.

The Structure of Basic English

Pronunciation. This part of Basic was no different than standard English pronunciation. Manuals of Basic did not even have a pronunciation section in the table of contents.

Vocabulary. The logic of his analysis led Ogden to the conclusion that 850 words are enough for Basic vocabulary (he claimed that they cover the standard English vocabulary of 20,000). That is how he describes his final list: "The 850 words are in three groups—600 names of things, 150 names of qualities ("adjectives"), and 100 "operators" by which the system, so to say, is put into motion."[28] The most striking feature of Basic vocabulary (and the point of the most severe criticism) is that there are only sixteen verbs—an important characteristic that makes it very easy to learn.

It is immediately apparent that the structure of the Newspeak vocabulary in *1984* repeats (and mocks) the structure of Basic vocabulary, with the division of all Newspeak words into A, B, and C vocabulary (very much like three groups of words in Basic). But the most important similarity is not just three groups here and three groups there: rather, Newspeak, as well as Basic, eliminates a lot of words by substituting their meaning with others. In *The General Basic Dictionary* 25,000 words are defined by means of 850 Basic words[29]—in Newspeak there were certain words that "had their meanings extended until they contained within themselves whole batteries of words."[30]

Grammar. Any student of English grammar knows that the verbs make it extremely difficult to master. Since Basic has practically no verbs it is only natural to assume that its grammar is easy. And it really is. Let us listen to Ogden once again: "As in normal English, the addition of *-s* is made to the names of things as a sign that more than one is in question, and of *-er* and *-est* to the names of qualities as a sign of degree. 'Adverbs' are formed by putting *-ly* at the end of names of qualities; opposites, by putting *-un* in front; 300 of the names of things may take the endings *-er, -ing*, and *-ed*, producing two more names of things and two names of qualities, whose sense will give no trouble."[31] Comparison with Newspeak shows that even the wording is very much the same: "Any word could be negativated by adding the affix *un-*. All plurals were made by adding *-s* or *-es* as the case might be. Comparison of adjectives was invariably made by adding *-er, -est*."[32]

The Functions of Basic English

As mentioned previously, Basic was designed to serve two functions: to become an international auxiliary language and to serve as a beginning stage of learning standard English.

Basic English was highly regarded by Winston Churchill and Franklin D. Roosevelt. Practical steps were made in both the UK and USA to

implement Basic, although Churchill went much further, setting up a special Cabinet committee to study Basic. The committee recommended that Basic should be used by diplomats, the British Council, the Ministry of Information, and the BBC. Since Orwell worked at the BBC during World War II and since the BBC was directly supervised by the Ministry of Information at that time, these last two institutions are of special interest for us.

Contrary to often-expressed opinion,[33] Orwell's attitude towards Basic was far from simple—it changed many times. We know of three instances when Orwell spoke about Basic. At first glance, they seem quite favorable. In 1943[34] in his essay *The English People*, Orwell, commenting on the advantages of the English language, says: "It can also for international purposes be reduced to very simple pidgin dialects, ranging from Basic to *"Beche-de-mer"* English used in the South Pacific." Evidently, this is praise for the versatility of standard English, not for Basic.

In 1944 Orwell spoke twice about Basic in his regular column "As I Please"[35] in the newspaper *Tribune.* In the issue of January 28, Orwell writes: "*Tribune* may before long print one or more articles on Basic English. If any language is ever adopted as a world's "second" language it is immensely unlikely that it will be a manufactured one, and of the existing natural ones English has much the best chance, *though not necessarily in the Basic form.*[italics are mine—A.R.]"[36] Once again, careful reading shows that this is praise for the English language itself and its potential to become an international second language.

Finally, in the same year, Orwell mentions Basic once more: "One argument for Basic English is that by existing side by side with Standard English it can act as a sort of corrective to the oratory of statesmen and publicists. High-sounding phrases, when translated into Basic, are often deflated in a surprising way."[37] Now, what is Orwell praising in Basic? I believe he is praising its alleged ability to test whether someone is using inflated language to camouflage a lack of substance. Without entering a debate as to whether Basic really could do that, I will state that it is evident

that Orwell is not praising Basic as it was designed by its authors. In other words, nowhere does Orwell suggest using Basic either as an international language or as a first step to learning standard English.

But that is not all. We can examine Orwell's attitude toward Basic by analyzing his work at the BBC. Orwell joined the BBC on August 18, 1941, and resigned from his position as Talks Producer in the Indian section of its Eastern Service on November 24, 1943. It was at this time that great interest in Basic was shown by Churchill, Roosevelt, and Stalin.[38] In his speech *Common Tongue a Basis for Common Citizenship*, made at Harvard University on September 6, 1943, Churchill said his famous words: "Such plans [for the introduction of Basic] offer far better prizes than taking away other people's provinces or land, or grinding them down to exploitation. The empires of the future are the empires of the mind."[39]

As we know, Churchill made practical steps to implement his idea, setting up a special committee to make recommendations on Basic. And as far as the BBC was concerned, the recommendation was "that a substantial part of the BBC's daily output overseas should be translated into Basic English and that there should be regular lessons given in that language."[40]

Even prior to those recommendations there was some general interest in Basic at the BBC. Orwell himself had commissioned a talk on Basic and, as W. J. West says, "often discussed it with the others."[41] But by the time Basic became obligatory for the BBC news service Orwell had already left the Corporation. I believe that was the time when his attitude towards Basic abruptly changed, and his interest (natural in any student of language towards any new idea) turned to severe criticism. Orwell was frightened by the fact—and was one of the first to notice this dangerous tendency in the development of Basic—that little by little the aims that the creators of Basic intended were substituted by other, quite opposite goals. Basic began to be advertised as the universal means of communication, the global ersatz language that was to supplant all human languages. Again, it was not by chance that Churchill loved Basic. Its implementation was completely in line with his dream of reviving the traditional British

Empire. Who knows to what extent those dreams might have been realized had his cabinet not been defeated in July 1945 by the Labour party, which had no interest in pursuing this idea.

Orwell never explicitly expressed his negative opinion, so how do we know he grew so against it? We know it from two things: the reactions to Basic of those colleagues of Orwell who had to deal with the Cabinet recommendations, and from Orwell's description of Newspeak, which, as we have already seen, in many respects is modeled on Basic. A detailed comparison of Newspeak and Basic can be done only after we describe Newspeak in detail in the corresponding chapter—for now, suffice it to say again that many of the characteristics of Newspeak are definitely taken from Basic (the limited vocabulary, the roundabout way to describe things, the simplified grammar and word-formation, etc.). The reaction to Basic of Orwell's colleagues at the BBC is informative, however, because if Orwell had stayed with the BBC, he would have found himself in exactly the same position.

One of them, W. Empson, was assigned the task of translating news reports into Basic. Soon, he found the task impossible—so much so that he wrote a letter to Charles Ogden asking for his help: "The serious question is: How would the man putting it into Basic choose to do it? He would be sure to argue that there wasn't any other way of putting it into Basic except the one that expressed his own opinions."[42] Thus the person who did the translation (or who was responsible for the translations) would have the power to decide what was the real meaning of what was being said. This is exactly what Winston Smith does in *1984* when he is "rectifying" the meaning of what was being said.

All these facts and circumstances lead us to the conclusion that Orwell, while genuinely interested in Basic English at first, was terrified at the possibilities it gave to the rulers of the world for the future "empires of the mind."[43] An important detail is that Orwell was not criticizing the authors of Basic English; instead, he was highly critical of the purposes to which it was being assigned by the leaders of superpowers.

3. Friedrich von Hayek and *The Road to Serfdom*

"If the ideologists of socialism would single out the one book that ought to be locked up at any price and strictly forbidden, its dissemination and lecture carrying the most severe punishment, they would surely point to *The Road to Serfdom*."[44]

This is the opening paragraph of the obituary dedicated to Friedrich Hayek and published in *Time* magazine at the time of his death in 1992. For many readers all over the world, it was the first time they ever saw Hayek's name in print—few had any idea of who he was. And this is not surprising: "For most of Hayek's life, his ideas were almost totally out of fashion."[45] Indeed, he was little known in the West, to say nothing of Eastern Europe or Russia. However, after his death, "there has been increasing recognition of the influence that he exerted in both communist and noncommunist regimes."[46] Yet, the book *The Road to Serfdom*, when it was published in 1944, produced an impression comparable to the explosion of a bomb.

Friedrich von Hayek was born in 1899 in Austria, studied in Vienna, and taught at the University of London, the University of Chicago, and the University of Freiburg (Germany). In 1974 he received the Nobel Prize in economics. A passionate proponent of libertarianism, he considered growing state control over the economy as a dangerous development. Thus, he thought it was his duty to warn others about this danger, though he fully realized that his views were contrary to the public opinion of the time. That is how he came to write his famous book *The Road to Serfdom*, which was published in 1944, first in the UK and several months later in the US.[47] Hayek dared to speak up with his unpopular ideas because he considered it to be his duty to warn Anglo-American society, which, he believed, was heading in the same direction that brought Germany to fascism. As he had expected, the reaction of the intellectual elite was negative: "Nearly a century ago, most of the smart

people sneered when Friedrich Hayek published *The Road to Serfdom*. The world was wrong and Hayek was right."[48]

Let me briefly describe some of Hayek's ideas, which are of immediate importance for the present analysis.[49] I would like to stress that it would be impossible to try and retell his book in full; it is so rich with ideas that the only way to retell it would be to recite it word for word. Yet superficial glance at Hayek's book can be very misleading, as he can easily be construed as a blindly conservative capitalist with his assertion that a system of competition is the only path that can secure individual liberty. Accordingly, this is the stance of misinterpretation that many of his critics hold, although, as Hayek noted in an interview, many of them apparently never read his book all the way through.

At the time when Hayek wrote his book, socialism had a slightly different meaning than it does today. Then, it referred to central economic planning, whereas now it tends to mean redistribution of income through taxation policy and institutions of a welfare state. The effects of these more current aspects of socialism are slower to be felt because they are less direct, but Hayek proposes that they always push toward the same eventual end—limiting our freedom and growth as individuals. The main reason Hayek wrote his book, however, was that he feared England was about to experiment with socialist policy following World War II, and he felt it was his responsibility to warn the intellectuals leading the socialist movement of the problems this would bring about. Further, the United States was eager to latch onto a new ideology following the Great Depression as people's faith in capitalism was starting to falter. As Hayek mentions in his introduction, "If in the long run we are the makers of our own fate, in the short run we are captives of the ideas we have created."[50] This is a very important concept, and the central thesis of *The Road to Serfdom*. Through the course of his writing, Hayek's intention was primarily to highlight the ideas that were accepted and circulated in the mid-1940s and how closely they resembled those being spread in Germany

fifteen years prior to the ascent of Nazism, Nazism being the ultimate crystallization of Socialist doctrine.

To make the socialist argument plausible, the proponents of it have to play tricks with language. That's why Hayek pays great attention to language in his book, and that is why his ideas were important—and very close—to Orwell.

First, he illustrates this process of spoiling the language by using the word *freedom* as an example: "To the great apostles of political freedom the word had meant freedom from coercion, freedom from arbitrary power of other man, release from the ties which left the individual no choice but obedience to the orders of a superior to whom he was attached. The new freedom promised, however, was to be freedom from necessity, release from the compulsion of the circumstances which inevitably limit the range of choices of all of us, although for some very much more than for others."[51]

Incidentally, the same word is used by Orwell as the very first example of his Newspeak dictionary: "The word *free* still existed in Newspeak, but it could only be used in such statements as 'The dog is free from lice' or 'The 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."[52] The importance of this example for Orwell becomes even more evident if we keep in mind that *freedom* is one of the basic concepts in the novel—it is not by chance that Winston, "with the feeling that he was setting forth an important axiom," wrote in his diary: "Freedom is the freedom to say that two plus two make four. If that is granted, all else follows."[53]

This idea is further developed by Hayek in the chapter *The End of Truth*, specially dedicated to the role of language in the propaganda of socialism[54]: "But *freedom* or *liberty* are by no means the only words whose meanings have been changed into their opposites to make them serve as instruments of totalitarian propaganda. We have already seen how the

same happened to *justice* and *law*, *right* and *equality*. The list could be extended until it includes almost all moral and political terms in general use. Gradually, as this process continues, the whole language becomes despoiled, and words become empty shells deprived of any definite meaning, as capable of denoting one thing as its opposite."[55]

But maybe the most impressive example—and the one that no doubt was impressive for Orwell—is Hayek's example with the word *truth*: "The word 'truth' itself ceases to have its old meaning. It describes no longer something to be found; it becomes something to be laid down by authority, something which has to be believed in the interest of the unity of the organized effort and which may have to be altered as the exigencies of this organized effort require it."[56]

It is easy to show that such arguments indeed must have made a significant impression on Orwell, who independently arrived at similar conclusions. He knew by his own experience in the Spanish civil war that what was written about the war had very little connection (if any) to what really happened. In fact, in his essay *Looking Back on the Spanish War* he speaks in very much the same words: "I saw, in fact, history being written not in terms of what happened but what ought to have happened according to various 'party lines.'…the very concept of objective truth is fading out of the world."[57]

Orwell returned to this idea many times in his essays, newspaper articles and letters. Thus, in his *As I Please* column of February 4, 1944, he writes: "The really frightening thing about totalitarianism is not that it commits 'atrocities' but that it attacks the concept of objective truth: it claims to control the past as well as the future."[58] We find similar ideas in Orwell's letters of the same period, such as in his letter to H. J. Willmett of May 18, 1944[59], and in his letter to F. Barber of December 15, 1944.[60]

In the same year, 1944, Orwell wrote a review on Hayek's book. The review appeared in *Observer* newspaper on April 9, 1944, just one month after *The Road to Serfdom* was printed in the UK on March 10, 1944.

In his review Orwell gives his opinion of two new books, one of them being Hayek's. First of all, he pays tribute to Hayek's courage to speak up for unpopular ideas: "Of the two, Professor Hayek's book is perhaps more valuable, because the views it puts forward are less fashionable at the moment."[61] And this is what he thinks of Hayek's arguments themselves: "In the negative part of Professor's Hayek thesis there is a great deal of truth. It cannot be said too often—at any rate, it is not being said nearly often enough—that collectivism is not inherently democratic, but, on the contrary, gives to a tyrannical minority such powers as the Spanish Inquisitors never dreamed of."[62] Incidentally, to give such a high evaluation of Hayek's ideas while other intellectuals "sneered" was, in itself, also a courageous act.

NOTES

1. Only Swift was, strictly speaking, a predecessor of Orwell, while both Charles Ogden and Friedrich von Hayek were his contemporaries. That is why we are talking about *logical and historical* predecessors, meaning persons and concepts that influenced Orwell's views on language.
2. "…he is one of the writers I admire with least reserve, and *Gulliver's Travels*, in particular is a book which it seems impossible for me to grow tired of. I read it first when I was eight—one day short of eight, to be exact, for I stole and furtively read the copy which I was to be given next day on my eighth birthday—and I have certainly not read it less than half a dozen times since. Its fascination seems inexhaustible." (*The Collected Essays, Journalism and Letters of George Orwell*. Volume 4. Penguin Books, 1968), 257.
3. Ibid.
4. Orwell. *The Lost Writings*. Edited by W. J. West (New York: Arbor House, 1985), 112-116.
5. The date is important if we keep in mind that it was during these years (1943-1949) that Orwell started to think about and gradually develop his last book—*1984*.
6. *The Collected Essays*, volume 4, 252.
7. Ibid., 253. Incidentally, in his "Imaginary Interview" Orwell "discusses" this term with Swift:

   > Orwell: Since your day something has appeared called totalitarianism.
   > Swift: A new thing?

Orwell: It isn't strictly new, it's merely been made practicable owing to modern weapons and modern methods of communication. You yourself wrote about it with extraordinary prescience." (Orwell, *Lost writings,* 113-114).

8. Jonathan Swift, *Gulliver's Travels* (Boston-New York: Bedford/St. Martin's, 1995), 215.
9. Ibid., 221.
10. Ibid., 223.
11. Ibid., 244
12. See C.K. Ogden and I. A. Richards, *The Meaning of Meaning* (New York: Harcourt Brace, 1927), 11.
13. George Orwell, *1984* (Signet Classic, 1984), 256.
14. *Gulliver's Travels*, 247.
15. Ibid., 216.
16. S.I. Hayakawa, *Language in Thought and Action* (Harcourt Brace & Company, 1990), 8.
17. "Politics vs. Literature," in *The Collected Essays*, volume 4, 246.
18. *Gulliver's Travels,* 250.
19. Ibid., 251.
20. "Politics vs. Literature," in *The Collected Essays*, volume 4, 255.
21. Jonathan Swift, *A Proposal for Correcting, Improving and Ascertaining the English Tongue*: in a Letter to the Most Honourable Robert, Earl of Oxford and Mortimer, Lord High Treasurer of Great Britain. London, 1712.
22. Ibid., 8.
23. Ibid., 31.
24. *Gulliver's Travels*, 224.
25. C. K. Ogden, I. A. Richards, *The Meaning of Meaning: A Study of The Influence of Language upon Thought and of The Science of Symbolism*. 2nd edition revised (New York: Harcourt, Brace & Company, 1927). The first edition was published in 1923.
26. Ivor Richards, "Basic English and Its Applications," in *Basic English* (New York: The H. W. Wilson Company, 1944), 7.
27. For example, *New Testament in Basic English*, ed. by S. H. Hooke (New York: E. P. Dutton & Co, 1941); *Stories from Hans Anderson*, put into Basic English by C. Hughes Hartman (London: George Routeland & Sons, 1937); Plutarch. *Julius Caesar*, put into Basic English by A. P. Rossiter (London: George Routeland & Sons, 1933); Swift, Jonathan. *Gulliver in Lilliput*, put into Basic by C. Hartman

(London: George Routeland & Sons, 1934). Incidentally, excerpts from *Mein Kampf* by Adolf Hitler were also translated into Basic.

28. Charles Ogden, "The Basic Framework," in *Basic English* (New York: The H.W. Wilson Company, 1944), 25.
29. Ivor A. Richards, "Basic English and Its Applications," in *Basic English*, 21.
30. *1984*, 251.
31. Charles Ogden, "The Basic Framework," in *Basic English*., 27-28.
32. *1984*, 248-249.
33. For example: "In his discussions of Basic English in one of his *As I Please* columns in 1944 Orwell was entirely approving." Richard W. Bailey. "George Orwell and the English Language," in *The Future of Nineteen Eighty-Four* (Ann Arbor: The University of Michigan Press, 1984), 36.
34. "The English People" was published only in August, 1947.
35. "As I Please" was Orwell's column in *Tribune* weekly newspaper appearing every week from December 3, 1943 till April February 16, 1945 and thereafter irregularly until April 1947.
36. "As I please," 28 January 1944, in *The Collected Essays*, volume 3, 108.
37. "As I please," 18 August 1944, in *The Collected Essays*, volume 3, 244.
38. Judging by Churchill's words. We have no direct evidence that would prove Stalin's interest in Basic, but there is no reason not to trust Churchill's opinion. Besides, Stalin's interest in Basic can be seen indirectly from the popularity of Basic books in the Soviet Union; for example, the public library in my home town of Petrozavodsk has *Gulliver's Travels* in Basic, published in the 1930s. Petrozavodsk is, by Russian standards, a small provincial town, which shows that such books were available in every library in the country.
39. Address of the British Prime Minister, Winston Churchill, at Harvard University, September 6, 1943. *New York Times*, September 7, 1943.
40. War Cabinet Paper WP(43)551. Recommendation 15(F). Cited in: Orwell, *The Lost Writings* (New York: Arbor House, 1985), 62.
41. Orwell, *The Lost Writings*, 62.
42. Cited in Orwell, *The Lost Writings*, 64. The book gives the complete text of this letter. Another interesting part of it mentions Orwell's resigning from his position: "There were plans to do one [weekly news bulletin] for the East but they have been dropped at present." (63)
43. Of course, those who did not have to obey the Cabinet's recommendations, made fun of Churchill's obsession with the Basic English. The classic example is *Punch* magazine's translation of Churchill's famous phrase: "Never, in the history of

human conflict, was so much owed by so many to so few" as follows: "Never, in the history of men's disagreement, did such great numbers have so great a debt to such small number."

44. Tomas Jezek, Check Minister of Privatization, the author of an underground translation. Cited in "A Prophet in His Own Time," *Time*, April 6, 1992.
45. "A Prophet in His Own Time," *Time*, April 6, 1992.
46. Milton Freedman, Introduction to Fiftieth anniversary edition of *The Road to Serfdom* (University of Chicago Press, 1994), xx.
47. Not surprisingly, three US publishing houses, as Hayek tells in his preface to the 1956 edition, refused to publish the book because they considered it "unfit for publication by a reputable house," cited in F. A. Hayek, *The Road to Serfdom*, xvii.
48. Ronald Bailey, *Forbes.* Cited in F. A. Hayek. *The Road to Serfdom*.
49. I am indebted for part of this analysis to one of my students in the Orwell seminar at the English Department of UVM, Kenneth Johnson.
50. F. A. Hayek. *The Road to Serfdom*, 4.
51. Ibid., 29-30.
52. *1984*, 247. This and similar ideas of Orwell (for instance, his claim that "there would be many crimes and errors which it would be beyond his [that is a person's growing up with Newspeak as his sole language] power to commit, simply because they were nameless and therefore unimaginable," *1984*, 255) are often used by modern linguists and especially neurolinguists to accuse Orwell of his being proponent of Sapir-Warf hypothesis and of his inability to see that we do not think in words of some language but rather we speak in some intermediary "mentalese." (see, for example, Steven Pinker, *The Language Instinct*, HaperCollins, 2000, 45). I believe these critics miss the point. Even if mentalese does exist, Orwell concern is that there is no way a person can share his or her ideas with others. It is common knowledge that when something disappears, the label (word) disappears, too. On the other hand, if a person lacks the words to describe something, it is next to impossible to imagine this thing, no matter what is going on at "mentalese" level. Both of these points are discussed at length in the chapter dedicated to German and Russian languages.
53. Ibid., 69.
54. Hayek warns the reader, though, that "neither propaganda itself nor the techniques are peculiar to totalitarianism." (168). We will have to return to this point later.
55. *The Road to Serfdom*, 174.
56. Ibid., 178-179.