

Orwell, Trump, and Twitter: Reexamining the Relationship Between Politics and Language

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In 1946, George Orwell declared that the English language was declining. His six rules for writing have persisted over the decades, encouraging students like me to write concisely and sincerely. With the advancement of modern science and technology, politics, communication, and the English language have all undergone a series of revolutionary changes. Social media platforms like Twitter play an increasingly important role in daily life. Some political leaders, most notably Donald Trump, have used Twitter to communicate with masses of people. Does the rise of Twitter call Orwell's arguments about the connection between politics and the English language into question?

Orwell's essay "Politics and the English Language" examines the connection between politics and modern English, criticizing contemporary prose for being too vague, too lengthy, and too convoluted. To combat this decline, Orwell advocates for a more direct style of writing. He begins by examining the weaknesses of modern English writing, pointing out that "Modern English, especially written English, is full of bad habits," especially "the mixture of vagueness and sheer incompetence," which have been "spread by imitation" (165). To unlearn these "bad habits," writers should think more clearly, as this is "a necessary first step toward political regeneration" (163). He

analyzes four representative examples, identifying their common qualities: “staleness of imagery” and “lack of precision” (165). Each of the passages he includes use convoluted language, thus obscuring their intentions and ideas. In order to make his point more convincing, Orwell translates a vivid passage from Ecclesiastes into modern English. The original version is clear and comprehensible, using precise words and specific images, while the translated version is complicated by redundant language and wordy sentences. Based on his analyses, Orwell concludes, “The whole tendency of modern prose is away from concreteness” (175). Thus emerges the connection between modern English prose and the development of politics: modern English can allow people to conceal their intentions.

Orwell argues that politics plays a significant but reversible role in the decline of the English language. He explains why political language is filled with “euphemism, question-begging, and sheer cloudy vagueness” (173). Politicians often defend indefensible issues; for example, they might call bombarding defenseless villages and harming innocent civilians “pacification” (173). In order to conceal the violence of their actions, politicians express themselves euphemistically. ‘Pacification’ connotes neutrality, masking the cruelty of war. Orwell then posits, “The great enemy of clear language is insincerity,” warning readers that corrupt thoughts and convoluted language mutually reinforce one another (173). If politicians want to conceal reality, they use complicated and imprecise language. In addition, when ambiguous and indirect writing are imitated and spread, they corrupt people’s thinking. Orwell believes the decay of both language and politics can be undone, however, presenting six rules to cure the problems with modern prose:

1. Never use a metaphor, simile or other figure of speech which you are used to seeing in print.
2. Never use a long word where a short one will do.
3. If it is possible to cut a word out, always cut it out.
4. Never use the passive voice where you can use the active.

5. Never use a foreign phrase, a scientific word or jargon word if you can think of an everyday English equivalent.
6. Break any of these rules sooner than say anything outright barbarous. (176)

Applying these rules to English prose – particularly to political prose – allows writers to express their intentions clearly and present their ideas concisely. As a result, concealment, corruption, and vagueness – in politics and beyond – can be reduced. More importantly, politicians have to think more critically about their choices and be more straightforward about their intentions. Orwell’s essay is constructive and convincing, giving people the means not only to improve their writing but also to improve society. However, doesn’t Donald Trump’s rise to power by communicating through social media challenge some of Orwell’s ideas?

In his *Financial Times* article “Why Donald Trump Is Proving George Orwell Wrong” Simon Kuper illustrates how Trump’s communication style refutes Orwell’s central ideas about the value of concise writing. Kuper opens with an anecdote about Orwell’s 1949 novel *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, explaining that it became a bestseller again as “a defence of truth . . . in the Trumpian era of ‘alternative facts.’” Before the “Trumpian era,” Kuper wholeheartedly believed in Orwell’s ideas. He calls himself “an Orwell nut,” noting that he could recite passages from Orwell’s “Politics and the English Language” by heart. As Trump rose to power by way of social media, however, Kuper began to question Orwell’s arguments. While Orwell argues that “clear speech enables clear thought and prevents lies,” Donald Trump’s words suggested to Kuper that “clear speech can enable lies.” According to Kuper, Trump follows five of Orwell’s six rules but also applies “huckster’s utopianism” to writing, “a rhetorical genre that Orwell didn’t have.” A “huckster” is someone who sells or advertises something in an aggressive, dishonest, or annoying way, and “utopianism” refers to a social or political idea that is impractically ideal (Merriam-Webster.com). In other words, Trump uses Orwell’s rules for directness and sincerity but to brag, show off, and promote dishonest and unrealistic ideas. Communication is extremely important for politicians

in the current political sphere, and, according to Kuper, Trump understands “the rules of communication: the audience is bored before you’ve even said anything; style trumps substance; and facts don’t persuade people.” For instance, Trump simplifies complicated international relations into simple sentences like “The Iran deal is a disaster” (qtd. in Kuper 2). This language sets up a simple equation for readers (Iran = bad), proving that “simple language can encourage simple thought” – quite a shift from Orwell’s point that “clear language enables clear thought.” Trump’s concise style influences people’s thoughts and even makes lies sound like truth, but it does not encourage deeper thinking about current issues.

Orwell fails to consider that public figures can use concise language to communicate insincere ideas more persuasively. People can easily understand an uncomplicated sentence without the need to think about it deeply. Simple language, like Trump’s, inspires automatic thought. Trump’s ability to use concise language to lie more convincingly represents a possibility Orwell never considered. Moreover, with the development of technology, social media has become a powerful mode of communication. A post can be viewed by millions of people in a minute. Twitter is one of the most popular social media platforms, with 330 million active users a month (Lin). Donald Trump is an avid Twitter user, who recognized himself as “the Best 140 Character Writer in the World” (Trump 2012). With social media, he can mislead many people with a single post. Now, in Trump’s tweets, corrupt thoughts and clear language mutually reinforce each other.

Twitter requires that its users share posts that are no more than 280 characters each (the platform doubled its original 140-character limit in 2017), which forces people to be concise. In theory, Orwell would prefer this limitation, as he believes concise, explicit language helps people to think clearly. During the 2016 campaign, Donald Trump posted a cumulative total of 7,627 tweets in 512 days (Kayam 157). Because a tweet must be brief, users often include hyperlinks, abbreviations, and other forms of simplification

in their posts. However, some simplification tactics may distract people and complicate the post. Anyone who doesn't understand an abbreviation, for example, will need to look it up. In Trump's tweets, he often inserts hyperlinks and tags and writes simple, exaggerated sentences to express his intense opinions. The logic of a complex thought is also inevitably simplified in a tweet, which may cause misunderstandings. Thus, writing concisely may not encourage the clarity and comprehensibility that Orwell imagined, especially when it comes to politics. Political issues are often very sophisticated, and politicians cannot explain complex issues in only 280 characters, even with the most concise sentences.

In addition, posting a tweet requires little thought or effort, which means that posts often become more emotional than rational. In his article "The Age of Twitter: Donald J. Trump and the Politics of Debasement," Brian Ott analyzes Donald Trump's Twitter feed. Ott identifies three key features of Twitter: "simplicity, impulsivity, and incivility" (60). Ott also writes that people find it "easier to say something nasty about someone when they are not physically present" (62). Trump's posts on Twitter confirm Ott's three characteristics: they are simple, impulsive, and uncivil. A 2020 statistical analysis of Trump's tweets reveals that 22.8% are directed against political opponents, 22.7% contain slogans such as "Make American Great Again," and 47.4% are negative, with content that is directed against something or someone (Kayam 160). In its ideal form, politics is constructive and sincere, rational rather than impulsive, and built on civility. While Twitter encourages concision through its character limit, it does not encourage clarity, rationality, or civility, as Orwell might have hoped. Instead, people may use Twitter primarily to share irrational and inconsiderate thoughts.

As society has made great technological leaps since 1946, George Orwell's ideas about politics and modern English might no longer apply. With the advent of social media, most people now digest language and content much more quickly as there is so much information online. In fact, a year after Twitter doubled this limit, only 12% of tweets

exceeded 140 characters, indicating that concision still rules the platform (Perez). As a result, we may not reflect deeply on the words we read. Rather, we perceive the meaning of words superficially. Though Orwell would have imagined that the character limit Twitter imposes would remind us to only post after careful consideration, the accessibility of social media actually encourages us to post as Trump does – impulsively, irrationally, and uncivilly. Trump’s use of Twitter alters Orwell’s ideas, placing Orwell’s six rules for writing on the verge of extinction.

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