

# Language and Thought Control

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Orwell believed that language is one of a dictator's most important weapons. In his novel 1984, "Big Brother" uses "doublespeak" to control the people. Orwell exposed similar misuses of language by real politicians in "Politics and the English Language."

Things like... the Russian purges and deportations and the dropping of the atom bombs on Japan, can [only] be defended by arguments which are too brutal for most people to face. . . . Thus political language has to consist largely of euphemism,<sup>1</sup> question-begging and sheer cloudy vagueness. Defenseless villages are bombarded from the air, the inhabitants driven out into the countryside, the cattle machine-gunned, the huts set on fire with incendiary bullets: this is called *pacification*. Millions of peasants are robbed of their farms and sent trudging along the roads with no more than they can carry: this is called *transfer of population* or *rectification of frontiers*. People are imprisoned for years without trial, or shot in the back of the neck or sent to die of scurvy in Arctic lumber camps: this is called *elimination of unreliable elements*. Such phraseology is needed if one wants to name things without calling up mental pictures of them. . . .

The great enemy of clear language is insincerity. When there is a gap between one's real and one's declared aims, one turns as it were instinctively to long words and exhausted idioms, like a cuttlefish squirting out ink. . . . When the general atmosphere is bad, language must suffer. . . .

But if thought corrupts language, language can also corrupt thought. . . . This invasion of [the] mind by ready-made phrases can only be prevented if one is constantly on guard against them, and every such phrase anaesthetizes a portion of one's brain. . . .

Probably it is better to put off using words as long as possible and get one's meaning as clear as one can through pictures or sensations. Afterward one can choose—not simply *accept*—the phrases that will best cover the meaning, and then switch round and decide what impression one's words are likely to make on another person. . . .

I think the following rules will cover most cases:

- (i) Never use a metaphor, simile, or other figure of speech which you are used to seeing in print.
- (ii) Never use a long word where a short one will do.
- (iii) If it is possible to cut a word out, always cut it out.
- (iv) Never use the passive<sup>2</sup> where you can use the active.
- (v) Never use a foreign phrase, a scientific word, or a jargon word if you can think of an everyday English equivalent.
- (vi) Break any of these rules sooner than say anything outright barbarous.

<sup>1</sup> *euphemism*: inoffensive phrase used instead of a harsher term, such as "passed away" instead of "died"

<sup>2</sup> In the passive voice, the subject is *acted upon*. In the active voice, the subject *acts*. For example, "The pedestrian was hit by my car" is passive. "I hit the pedestrian" is active.