

Les mémoires de nos lauréats

Coralie Bonnet : The Role of Language in Our Understanding of the World on the Basis of "Newspeak" in Orwell's *Nineteen Eighty-Four*

At the time Orwell wrote *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, his aim was to warn people against the undemocratic regimes which were taking power in Europe. He also felt the need to inform his contemporaries that the rulers tended (maybe still even tend) to make them less and less able to realize how far their implication in their private life could go. To illustrate this, he created *Newspeak*, a restricted language conceived to diminish the possibilities of individual thoughts and opinions of the people. Without a word for 'democracy', for instance, people cannot know that another organisation of the state is possible to improve their -awful- living standards. The idea behind *Newspeak* is that by reducing the level of consciousness of its citizens, the Party will be able to control their minds more efficiently. In the description of the methods used by the totalitarian rulers to maintain power, Orwell dealt with some of the contemporary systems he knew, but he also made up others which are still regarded as likely premonitions: the way he examined language was one of the manipulations he gave a picture of in *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, but not only, for other writings of Orwell's reveal his view on language. For those reasons, and because I am very interested in the questions raised by the philosophy of language, the question which motivated the writing of my dissertation was "what is the role of language in our understanding of the world?"

Whoever read *Nineteen Eighty-Four* indubitably noticed that lie was the dominant practice in Oceania, and while the Ministry of Truth actually propagated these lies, the Ministry of Plenty made sure that shortages were hard enough to maintain people in the fear of war and of dying like animals in the prison sheltered by the Ministry of Love. Orwell's description of how lie is orchestrated and actually became official truth is very relevant to the main theme of the dissertation: language. Orwell's novel has for a very long time been famous for its ingenuous system of daily life's surveillance. However, the real control of the population of Oceania was probably efficient also because of the Party's methods for controlling thought and language, *doublethink* and *Newspeak*. And if *doublethink* enabled the rulers to have influence over thought directly, *Newspeak* was actually even more subtle than that, for it exercised power over thought through language. In *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, Orwell managed to portray what he planned for the future of his contemporaries according to two parameters: politics and language. And if the world of *Nineteen Eighty-Four* lacks hope, it is perhaps because the author feared that eventually, society will suffer from isolation, dehumanization, and, most of all, manipulation. But what he attached even more importance to was the possibility he had, before he died, to try to make his contemporaries aware of what was already going on at the time he lived, but also of what was about to happen if they were not careful. One should then consider the current applications of Orwell's visions of the future. In the novel, *doublethink* and *Newspeak* were weapons to condition the human mind, which turned out to be at least as powerful as bombs are for the destruction of entire cities. Nowadays, skilfully manipulated language and -'mass destruction'- weapons are used side by side. When I began writing my paper, I did not know which one was the most powerful. I am now pretty sure that the most dangerous is no longer the noisiest one.

The last questions one can now have are related to the means the author had to make us conscious. Did Orwell choose the best way to communicate this urgent message to his contemporaries? Was *Nineteen Eighty-Four's* fictional universe the best means he had to make people aware of the totalitarian threat he saw coming at the time he wrote his last novel? Is the book literature or propaganda? In my opinion, the novel is more than a mere attack on Stalinism or Nazism. It is a threatening picture inside of which every detail becomes a symbol of Orwell's views on politics, language, history...