

Bamboozle, baffle and blindside

[Nina Power](#)

Published 28 May 2009

Newspeak's foggy legacy is all around us

Sixty years after the publication of *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, it is hard to think of any major institution not open to the epithet “Orwel-lian”. From Channel 4's barely ironic *Big Brother* to the ever-increasing surveillance measures of a paranoid and cloyingly invasive state, Orwell anticipated a peculiarly British nightmare, in which class and the smell of cabbage just never seem to go away, no matter how post-industrial we try to be.

The bureaucratisation of every dimension of life in *Nineteen Eighty-Four*'s Oceania – work, free time, not to mention the puritanical restrictions on sexual expression – is reflected in the blank, official-sounding words that Orwell used to represent them. The Ministries of Truth, Love and Peace, ominous enough in their full form, become in their Newspeak formulations Minitrue, Miniluv and Minipax, while tacky erotic material to keep the proles distracted is produced by the mostly female-staffed Pornosec. Some of the best-known words from *Nineteen Eighty-Four* – doublethink, thoughtcrime and unperson – are terms whose very blankness belies the punishment and fate of those associated with them. It is, therefore, above all in the language of *Nineteen Eighty-Four* that Orwell's deepest fears about the fate of human freedom are expressed.

In the early 1940s, Orwell had briefly supported C K Ogden's Basic English campaign, an attempt to simplify the language for teaching and everyday purposes. He soon changed his mind, however, and would satirise it mercilessly in his depiction of Newspeak and the icy banality of bureaucratic language.

One of the most distinctive features of New-speak is the way it shrinks every year. “Each reduction is a gain,” as the appendix to *Nineteen Eighty-Four* puts it, “since the smaller the area of choice, the smaller the temptation to take thought.” But if Newspeak lives today – and anyone familiar with the language of managerialism in government, business and academia would be hard-pressed to deny that it does – it thrives by pursuing a quite different strategy from the one Orwell describes in the novel.

We are certainly surrounded by (even trapped in) a language designed to bamboozle, baffle and blindside – a lexicon that serves the same purpose as Newspeak, namely to make impossible all modes of thought other than that of the reigning ideology. But here it is not so much a question of attenuating language as expanding it. Recent years have seen an astonishing proliferation of coinages, buzzwords and neologisms. Rather than seeing a carefully controlled reduction in the number of officially sanctioned words, we are instead overwhelmed by wave upon wave of faddish expressions and tautologies – a kind of junk syntax in which there is no more reason for a word to be in one part of a phrase than another. (Orwell was certainly right about this: the grammar of Newspeak is characterised by the interchangeability of different parts of speech: “Any word in the language . . . could be used as either verb, noun, adjective or adverb.”)

Take *Creative Britain: New Talents for the New Economy*, a document put out in February 2008 by the Department for Innovation, Universities and Skills, in which the following passage appears: “Creativity is a dynamic process and we will continue to review and update the commitments in this strategy. But we are confident that it sets down a solid platform of support for creativity from the grass roots to the global stage.” Not only are many of the words interchangeable, but, as Orwell predicted, there is also something sinister about seeing them thrown together like that. The effect is a vagueness so oppressive that it makes it almost impossible to argue with. And this is precisely the point. Sit in any meeting, whether at a company HQ or at a university, or be a participant in a focus group, and the discussion will invariably turn to questions of “benchmarking”, “quality assessment” and “blue-sky thinking” – as if one were sitting in sunny California rather than

provincial England. People will “speak to” documents, forgetting that we generally speak to other human beings rather than to pieces of paper. “Clients”, whether they be students, consumers or voters, will be “consulted” as part of some “new initiative” or other. There will be “collaborations” and “partnerships” involving “stakeholders”.

Participants will talk for hours and hours in an upbeat, aspirational way. And there will be coffee and biscuits, and people will congratulate one another at the end for such a “wonderfully productive session”. And yet nothing will really have been said. And certainly nothing will have been done – nothing good, at least. It’s not that we have to lie about production figures, as the Stalinist broadcasts by Orwell’s Big Brother did; rather that we have to compensate for the way we barely produce anything at all by becoming obsessed with “innovation”.

New Labour’s debased currency of “creative industries” and the supposed allure of “Cool Britannia”, with its bands, fashion, art galleries, “urban regeneration” and “iconic architecture”, are promulgated and propped up by hype that depends on the ceaseless chatter of self-congratulation. The writer Steven Poole calls this attempt to saturate the mind with misleadingly one-sided pronouncements “Unspeak”. You might also call it “Nu-Language”, an ominous word-cloud that drifts from one department to another, providing each of them with the illusion of activity and the false comforts of a discourse of dynamism that is incapable of recognising its own sterility.

The more our economic confidence fades and the less we believe that genuine social progress is possible, the more we are encouraged to keep talking at any price, even (or especially) if no one is listening. Anything to block out the worrying idea that not only are we a bit-player on the world stage, but we don’t even know how to begin to solve some of our most basic social problems: poverty, housing, health and education.

The Nu-Language that has so dominated the past decade is dangerously self-referential, and all too effective in enabling us to ignore urgent social issues. The institutions that peddle it are complicit in a linguistic fog that is far more effective at eradicating clear thinking than Orwell could ever have imagined. But it can’t last. Just as the financial collapse has burst the housing bubble, so our public institutions might

soon have to confront a simple fact: that words alone cannot protect them from the reality they have tried to manipulate for so long.

Nina Power is a writer and academic

This article was originally published on 28 May 2009 in the issue [Big Brother](#)

© New Statesman 1913 – 2009