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Orwell's Incomplete Argument

The scene: a street in the Kingsbridge section of the Bronx in New York City, on a sunny day in the year 1999. The persons involved: a mother accompanied by her daughter –the little girl perhaps four years of age– and myself, the un-expecting and surprised observer. The issue: apparently, the little girl was not walking as swiftly alongside her mother as desired. This disobedience set off a tirade of profanities: "If you [expletive] don't [unintelligible], I will break your [expletive] face". With this extreme example, I would like to direct your attention to the matter at hand: the deterioration of language. In a 2002 survey, seventy-nine percent of the participants classified "lack of respect and courtesy in American society [as] a serious problem." More than one-third admitted also to using "foul language in public" (Crenson).

George Orwell cites two causes for imprecise, dishonest, and generally deteriorating language in his "timeless" (Kuttner) essay "Politics and the English Language". Foremost, he blames politically and economically motivated writing for the general decline and proclaims: "All issues are political issues, and politics itself is a mass of lies [...]. When the general atmosphere is bad, language must suffer." Subsequently, he points out that individual carelessness and imitation result in "ugly and inaccurate" expression and style. The deterioration is a "reversible process", according to Orwell, as the use of language without the necessary care is only a result of "slovenliness". Although, he appears pessimistic, when he writes: "[...] the decadence of our language is *probably* curable."

Nevertheless, Orwell is precise in his recommendation for treatment. He advocates practicing (practicing, as in exercising) concise and specific language, and to "[...] get one's meaning as clear as one can [...]." He suggests avoiding pretense, averting metaphors which are popular or have inconclusive meaning, favoring English equivalents to foreign or scientific jargon, overall shortening of text by elimination of words (especially meaningless ones), and consistent use of an active voice. He also suggests that by applying these guidelines *pragmatically*, one avoids writing "anything outright barbarous". Modern academic commentary recognizes that Orwell's criticism applies to contemporary writing and language-use, too. Kuttner writes: "[...] many editors and writers could use a refresher course in their Orwell", and Eugene Goodheart states: "Orwell *remains* a valuable guide to the resources of the vernacular."

George Orwell set a high benchmark for content and style in language and writing, only to miss the target when he remains unclear about the aim of "Politics and the English Language". He is undecided whether to provide advice for writers or deliver an ideological pamphlet. By writing "Political language [...] is designed to make [...] murder respectable [...]", he (intentionally?) extends the essay beyond the core idea: providing guidance for writers. As a result, Orwell's own writing serves as an example for his own criticism, stated earlier in the same essay. There he writes: "The whole tendency of modern prose is away from concreteness" and "The great enemy of clear language is insincerity [w]hen there is a gap between one's real and one's declared aims [...]." Carl Freedman, who comments on Orwell's argumentative style in College English, observes this indistinctness too, charges him with "[...] rapid, contradictory shifts in theoretical position [...]" (330), and concludes that "[...] Orwell's detailed stylistic advice is [...] dangerous and ideologically loaded" (332).

Orwell provides a remarkable argument on language-use *and* serves as an example by demonstrating his own writing-weaknesses (he even admits them). However, his overall contention –that political and economical reasons are at fault for the decline of language– is acutely deficient, as he disregards the influence of fundamental social issues. Not valuing social principles, such as honesty, morality, and respect, directly influences the deterioration of language. This paper illustrates *why* Orwell's argument is deficient by discussing contemporary issues. It does not consider, however, character-corrosion, as 'bad character' does not always use 'bad language', and 'good character' does not always use 'good language'.

Due to the complexity of subject and terminology alike, I wish to provide context before proceeding. In Moral Principles and Social Values, Jennifer Trusted discusses social "codes of behavior" (interchangeable terms are: "social values", "customs" or "moral principles") and asserts that mankind has better chances of survival when respecting the basic principles of moral awareness (viii). She distinguishes between "primary" and "secondary" values (114), and identifies several of them: honesty, social responsibility, and respect (primary); and "taking of property", "care of the mentally ill", as well as "treatment of animals" (secondary, 120-22). She also provides examples of secondary social behaviors, relevant to language: keeping of promises (honesty, 85); a politician whose policy is criticized and who calls attention to consequences, instead of changing the policy (social responsibility, 162); and use of "evaluative overtones" to identify people or groups (respect, 22). Recent examples of behavior, demonstrated by individuals and institutions, further illustrate how not valuing social principles and the deterioration of language correlate. Neglect of values promotes distorted, if not corrupt language:

Honesty: "Mistakes were made" is an "evasive construction" (American Heritage) and a

phrase frequently used by contemporary politicians and corporations to conceal and distract. Its ambiguity is favored in situations where an individual or institution prefers to avoid honesty. Orwell, commenting on "vagueness", writes: "In our time, political speech and writing are largely the defense of the indefensible." Trusted, devoting an entire chapter to "Fact and Value" (17-25), explains that context and use of evaluative words drive the effects of language. She continues: "[...] evaluations can avoid reference to factual detail even though knowledge of the factual detail might affect the evaluation" (17). The expression "Mistakes were made" bears no value and does not contain any "factual detail". It is misleading and, instead of encouraging or facilitating its continuation, aims at ending dialogue.

Also related to honesty in language and fitting Orwell's description of "pretentious diction" are the following patterns: product-advertising, saturated with superlatives such as 'world's greatest'; sports tournaments, branded as 'World Championships', although teams from only a single country participate; and the recently observed increase of scandals related to inflated résumés of business executives (Stanton), and business school applicants (Associated Press). Unfortunately, ostentatious wording and insincerity (sometimes camouflaged as "stretching the truth", Stanton) have embedded into everyday-language. We accept, that product promoters have no shame in exaggerating the message they send beyond silliness, and that applicants consider violation of basic ethics principles minor wrongdoings, only.

Social Responsibility: Business transactions executed at Enron "benefited a few Enron employees at the expense of shareholders [...]" (Partnoy), and resulted not only in financial losses for institutional investors, but created tremendous social impact when employees saw their retirement savings vanish (Alexander). In response to an indictment against him, one of the senior executives believed to be co-responsible for the scandal released the following

statement through his attorney (quoted by Ivanovich): "Enron's board of directors, its CEO, and its chairman directed and praised his work. Accountants and lawyers reviewed and approved his work [...]." Others praised and approved his work? I doubt that the individuals affected negatively by the scandal agree. Greed of a few individuals caused destructive economic and social impact. The choice of words observed aims at minimizing the issue, and is an attempt to divert attention away from the issue at hand. Orwell comments on such language and labels it as "Statements [...] made with intent to deceive". I call it irresponsible deflection of ownership.

The recurring neglect of responsibility and honesty in corporations even led to a reform of accounting principles. The Economist, referring to recent corporate accounting scandals, summarizes in its August 2002 article "In Search of Honesty" that "America no longer trusts its corporate leaders to tell the truth [...]." Sadly, because managers are so careless, we need to scrutinize their work, and have to "[warn corporate leaders] with the sound of prison doors slamming" (Economist).

Likely to have been driven by financial motives, too, was a 2002 statement by the Spanish prime minister (quoted by Julia Scheeres), released after a sunken tanker threatened the coastal lines with twenty million gallons of oil, which were about to spill through the cracked hull: "I believe there is an unjustified alarmism, [...]." Unjustified? As in 'groundless', 'unfounded', and 'unfair'? Those words are synonyms for "unjustified", but would all those fishermen affected by the catastrophe, who only wish to provide for their families, and whose incomes depend on an intact ecosystem use the same language? According to Dan McFadden there were twenty-three species affected after the Exxon Valdez had spilled 'only' ten million gallons of oil into an Alaska bay. Two billion dollars were spent on ecological recovery and

cleanup and an entire fishing-industry of a region closed for several years. Therefore, it is socially irresponsible of the Spanish government to minimize risk through such a cynical statement. It is, too, a poor choice of language, attempting to conceal the potential consequences of a catastrophe of such magnitude, which threatens entire communities. Mankind's responsibility is to preserve nature for future generations. Hence, demonstrating initiative and taking action to address issues such as the described is more practical than the spoken word, especially in circumstances such as a catastrophic oil spill. Although, the thought that produces words is the same thought that leads to or prevents actions.

Respect: A common form of language deterioration is noticeable in relation to mutual respect between individuals. Controversial musicians frequently entertain language that expresses disrespect for others, as lyrical excerpts from the Limp Bizkit' song "Break Stuff" illustrate: "My suggestion is to keep your distance / Cuz [sic] right now I'm dangerous"; "I pack a chainsaw / I'll skin your ass raw". The lyrics suggest that the artist demands respect and distance from others; they also warn of harm should that demand not be fulfilled. Artists often argue that their prose entails figurative meaning, and that its intent is not to insult. However, respect should be mutual, and demanding respect from others warrants being respectful of them, too. The figurative message sent in these lyrics does not promote respect and is derogative. Its violent forcefulness leads to the contrary of what the artist intends: resistance. In interpersonal communications, pressure applied results in counter-pressure.

Unarguably disrespectful was baseball-pitcher John Roker's behavior in 1999. During an interview with Sports Illustrated's Jeff Pearlman, he complains –amongst other things– about non-English-speaking foreigners visiting Times Square, and simultaneously attempts to mitigate his comments: "I'm not a racist or prejudiced person, [...] but certain people bother

me." I wonder how a tourist visiting New York City could possibly bother Mr. Rucker personally, as visiting Times Square is no invasion of privacy. His choice of expression and subsequent justifications are quite 'rocky' and very troublesome, as disrespectfulness toward individuals that did not provoke any such reaction is an actual provocation.

The previous two paragraphs certainly invite a discussion about freedom of speech. However, invoking this argument would imply that fundamental disagreements in opinion or differences in taste, customs, or beliefs, automatically couple with derogative and dismissive language, which they do not. The point is: freedom of speech gets along very well with sincere, polite, and respectful interpersonal communication through language.

Going back to George Orwell's contention: was he too ambitious, when he wrote in "Politics and the English Language" of a "reversible process", and that language is "curable"? One wishes he were not, although Orwell oversimplifies the solution to the problem by suggesting that writers alone have enough impact on language. He erred significantly when he disregarded the influence of fundamental social factors. The rapid decline of values and morality in society has a much greater impact than politically motivated writing. Orwell only briefly mentions that other possible causes for deterioration in language exist, when he states "[...] language merely reflects existing social conditions [...]".

Learning about the dynamics of society and social customs, and recognizing moral values and principles begins in childhood. Jennifer Trusted writes: "[...] moral teaching in childhood has a very great influence on us all" (114-5). This, in essence, shifts the responsibility for the deterioration of language to parents. In a 2002 survey titled "A Lot Easier said than done" (conducted by Public Agenda), participating parents indicate that they recognize the need to teach "absolutely essential [social values]". The survey shows too, that

parents "worry more about protecting their child from negative social influences than about paying the bills [...]" and that few parents believe they have been successful in teaching their kids "[...] many of the values they consider 'absolutely essential'". Seventeen percent of these parents also indicate that they "see how [their] child has picked up some bad habits from [the parent]", and that kids "use bad language". The overwhelmed mother, described in the beginning of this paper yelling at her four-year old, illustrates how behavior is taught from generation to generation. The mother's choice of language toward her little girl has likely been influenced by the choice of language used toward herself, by her own mother. Wallerstein, Lewis, and Blakeslee explore how parenting affects the learning of social codes of behavior in The Unexpected Legacy of Divorce. One example is "Larry" who was aggressive toward women during his teenage years and early adulthood. His father's hostile behavior toward his wife, Larry's mother, resulted in Larry assuming a behavioral pattern he perceived socially acceptable (87, 93-5). At times, he even appeared proud of it: "A couple of weeks ago I hit my girlfriend in the face. [...] I guess I'm going to live my life like my dad" (109).

Preventing children from imitating bad habits related to language and behavior is parent's responsibility. They must pass on noble moral values and principles to their children during their upbringing. Moreover, I advocate parents should teach their children about both, socially acceptable principles, and socially unacceptable principles, with an emphasis on noble values, such as honesty, responsibility, and respect. Whenever parents choose to pass on noble values, choose not to pass on any values, or opt to teach unsuitable social behavior to their children, a chain reaction initiates. Children pass on learned customs and principles to their own children, who pass them along to their children, who pass them along to their children. It is an infinite process. However, parents who raise children with the understanding that there is

a choice left up to the individual, namely choosing between 'good behavior/acceptable social standards/modest use of language', and 'unpleasant behavior/unacceptable social standards/disrespectful use of language", can break a developed pattern of bad behavior (or prevent it from starting) and encourage development of adequate behavioral patterns. Those are parents, who teach their children how to make informed decisions in life, and provide the most important lesson of all: that there is always a choice.

Trusted and Orwell recognize that we make choices, whether to employ specific patterns of behavior, or apply care when using language. Orwell writes: "bad habits [...] spread by imitation and [...] can be avoided if one is willing to take the necessary trouble", and states that "an effect can become a cause, reinforcing the original cause and producing the same effect in an intensified form, and so on indefinitely." Trusted, explaining human behavior, suggests that adults evaluate moral principles and make choices, but do not always behave as expected (viii). She emphasizes, too:

Language is the tool of thought but thought is also dependent on language because through using language we develop our concepts and our knowledge about the world and about ourselves." (87)

Thus, there exists no 'offender-victim' relationship. A human adult, whose personality primarily formed through and was influenced by parents is still capable of recognizing social value, competent enough to develop socially acceptable behavior, (most of the time) adequately gifted to choose proper language, and should be mature enough to engage in a socially responsible lifestyle. In other words: despite the fact that we are exposed to foul language and disrespectful behavior in society, and although parenting forms most of an individual's personality and sets context for social behavior and use of language, the individual

human adult also *permits* exposure to, and chooses own use of language, creating what Orwell calls "an effect [becoming] a cause". Therefore, the human individual bears no less than fifty percent of the responsibility for influence through language or behavior. Each individual is responsible for his or her own actions. And for negligence, too.

Is there an outlook into the future and do lessons from the past exist that could reverse the decline of social values, or at least stop the deterioration of language? Many discussions are pending and attempt defining what is at fault for the decline, which occurred in recent decades. This paper argues that inadequate parenting skills cause declining values and deteriorating language; others blame too much watching of television ("Blame everything on the Box", Irish Times). Francis Fukuyama asserts that the most plausible reason for "seriously deteriorating social conditions" is "a broad cultural shift" related to industrialization and technology that occurred with rapid speed since the mid nineteen-sixties. He calls this shift the "great disruption", causing a "disruption in the world of social relationships":

The changing nature of work tended to substitute mental for physical labor, propelling millions of women into the workplace and undermining the traditional understandings on which the family had been based. Innovations in medical technology leading to the birth-control pill [...] diminished the role of reproduction and family in people's lives. And the culture of individualism, which in the laboratory and the marketplace leads to innovation and growth, spilled over into the realm of social norms, where it corroded virtually all forms of authority and weakened the bonds holding families, neighborhoods, and nations together. [...] broadly speaking, the technological change [...] caused [...] disruption in the world of social relationships.

"Social relationships", as Fukuyama describes them, depend on and function through language. Thus, when social code is corrupted, principles diminish, and social behavior worsens, language deteriorates, too. However, fundamental changes affecting social principles began influencing us much earlier than the nineteen-sixties. Jennifer Trusted, for example, describes changes to the "moral code of [society]" between the nineteenth and twentieth century and utilizes attitude toward divorce as an example. We consider it acceptable nowadays, but detested it then (86).

We can now see that not only political and economical reasons are at fault for the decline of language, as political language driven by economical motives is merely one of countless aspects, illustrating cause and effect of the deterioration. Not valuing fundamental social principles, such as honesty, morality, and respect, has a significantly greater impact on society than the written or spoken word alone. Parents must recognize this fact and raise their children responsibly. However, as society continues to change, language will continue to deteriorate. Recent examples of language-atrocities committed by our perceived leaders in politics and sports prove that Orwell was too ambitious when he projected that the process is "reversible". Going forward, I predict that those individuals who care and are willing to safeguard and maintain language will end up isolated from the rest of society. Resulting from the general decline in society, language purists will maintain a subculture of modest language (and will certainly know how to behave socially responsible). They will remain misunderstood and only converse within their own circles. Ray Bradbury might have been led by similar thought when he wrote Fahrenheit 451. The novel describes a twenty-fourth century society that forbids books. Interactive television standardizes, prescribes, and streamlines language, opinion, and thought. Books are "considered evil" and destroyed. Only through a small group

of individuals, who preserve literature "by memorizing [books]", substance continues to exist (CliffsNotes). It is a scary, but realistic outlook.

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