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*George Orwell writes about Politics and the English Language.*

- 1 Most people who bother with the matter at all would admit that the English language is in a bad way, but it is generally assumed that we cannot by conscious action do anything about it. Our civilization is decadent and our language, so the argument runs, must inevitably share in the general collapse. It follows that any struggle against the abuse of language is a sentimental archaism, like preferring candles to electric light or old-fashioned cabs to aeroplanes. Underneath this lies the half-conscious belief that language is a natural growth and not an instrument which we shape for our own purposes. 5
- 2 Now, it is clear that the decline of a language must ultimately have political and economic causes: it is not due simply to the bad influence of this or that individual writer. But an effect can become a cause, reinforcing the original cause and producing the same effect in an intensified form, and so on indefinitely. A man may take to drink because he feels himself to be a failure, and then fail all the more completely because he drinks. Yet he can solve his predicament if he simply stopped drinking. It is rather the same thing that is happening to the English language. It becomes ugly and inaccurate because our thoughts are foolish, but the sloppiness of our language makes it easier for us to have foolish thoughts. The point is that the process is reversible. 10 15
- 3 Modern English, especially written English, is full of bad habits which spread by imitation and which can be avoided if one is willing to take the necessary trouble. If one gets rid of these habits one can think more clearly, and to think clearly is a necessary first step toward political regeneration which ultimately benefits the common man: so that the fight against bad English is not frivolous and is not the exclusive concern of professional writers. 20
- 4 Two qualities are common to bad writing. The first is staleness of imagery; the other is lack of precision. The writer either has a meaning and cannot express it, or he inadvertently says something else, or he is almost indifferent as to whether his words mean anything or not. This mixture of vagueness and sheer incompetence is the most marked characteristic of modern English prose, and especially of any kind of political writing. As soon as certain topics are raised, the concrete melts into the abstract: prose consists less and less of words chosen for the sake of their meaning, and more and more of phrases tacked together like the sections of a prefabricated house. 25
- 5 Many political words are abused, resulting in words that have lost their original meaning or becoming a catch-all. The word *fascism* has now no clear meaning except in so far as it signifies "something not desirable." In the case of a word like *democracy*, not only is there no agreed meaning, but the attempt to make one is resisted from all sides. It is almost universally felt that when we call a country democratic we are praising it: consequently the defenders of every kind of regime claim that it is a democracy, and fear that they might have to stop using that word if it were tied down to any one meaning. Words of this kind are often used in a consciously dishonest way. The person who uses them has his own private definition, but allows his hearer to think he means something quite different, leading to many blunders. 30 35

- 6 In our time it is broadly true that political writing is bad writing. Where it is not true, it will generally be found that the writer is some kind of rebel, expressing his private opinions and not a "party line." When one watches some tired hack on the platform mechanically repeating the familiar phrases, one often has a curious feeling that one is not watching a live human being but some kind of puppet: a feeling which suddenly becomes stronger at moments when the light catches the speaker's spectacles and turns them into blank discs which seem to have no eyes behind them. A speaker who uses that kind of phraseology has gone some distance toward turning himself into a machine. The appropriate noises are coming out of his larynx, but his brain is not involved as it would be if he were choosing his words for himself. If the speech he is making is one that he is accustomed to make over and over again, he may be almost unconscious of what he is saying. And this reduced state of consciousness, if not indispensable, is at any rate favourable to political conformity. 40 45 50
- 7 In our time, political speech and writing are largely the defence of indefensible acts. Things like the continuance of British rule in India, the Russian purges and deportations, the dropping of the atom bombs on Japan, can indeed be defended, but only by disguising arguments which are too brutal for most people to face, and camouflaging actions which do not match the professed aims of the political parties. Thus political language has to consist largely of euphemism and question-begging. Defenceless villages are bombarded from the air, the inhabitants driven out into the countryside: this is called *pacification*. People are imprisoned for years without trial, or shot in the back of the neck: this is called *elimination of unreliable elements*. In essence, this becomes a way to manipulate public opinion. 55 60
- 8 The inflated style itself is a kind of euphemism. 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. One becomes a cuttlefish spurting out ink. In our age there is no such thing as "keeping out of politics." All issues are political issues, and politics itself is a mass of lies, evasions, folly, hatred, and schizophrenia. When the general atmosphere is bad, language must suffer. 65
- 9 But if thought corrupts language, language can also corrupt thought. A bad usage can spread by tradition and imitation even among people who should and do know better. The debased language that I have been discussing is in some ways very convenient. Phrases like *a not unjustifiable assumption* and *leaves much to be desired* are a continuous temptation, a packet of aspirins always at one's elbow. Look back through this essay, and for certain you will find that I have again and again committed the very faults I am protesting against. This invasion of one's 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. 70 75
- 10 I have not here been considering the literary use of language, but merely language as an instrument for expressing and not for concealing or preventing thought. One ought to recognize that the present political chaos is connected with the decay of language, and that one can probably bring about some improvement by starting at the verbal end. If you simplify your English, you are freed from the worst follies of orthodoxy. Political language is designed to make lies sound truthful and murder respectable, and to give an appearance of solidity to pure wind. One cannot change this all in a moment, but one can at least change one's own habits, and from time to time one can even, if one jeers loudly enough, send some worn-out and useless phrase -- some *Achilles' heel*, *hotbed*, *melting pot*, *acid test*, or other lump of verbal refuse -- into the dustbin, where it belongs. 80 85