Orwell for Interpreters

Dealing in rhetoric is part of a conference interpreter’s job, and many of us have a taste for it. Let’s take a look at that with a nod to George Orwell.

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It was a strange experience to interpret George Orwell's biographer Michael Shelden a few months ago. For the first time in what felt like years, most of my prep had consisted of plain old reading—no terminology searches, no checking Wikipedia for further background, just diving into a book and discovering the life of Eric Blair. Only the day before the job did it dawn upon me that I should probably refresh my Newspeak and maybe go over the Seven Commandments in both languages. I also realized, suddenly, that I would have to use language—Spanish, in this case—to interpret ideas about someone who used language to critique language.

Newspeak was Orwell's satirical critique of political propaganda, with its soundbite thinking and jargon. As he put it, “Political language ... is designed to make lies sound truthful and murder respectable, and to give an appearance of solidity to pure wind.” Repetition of lies, obfuscation, and redefinition of ordinary words were some of the methods he illustrated in 1984 and Animal Farm: “Big Brother is watching”, “Four legs good, two legs bad”, “War is peace”, and so on.

We interpreters (well, some of us!) love to channel our inner curmudgeon and inveigh against jargon, empty statements, PC language, and clichés, but dealing in rhetoric is part of our job, and many of us have a taste for it. We become experts at using set phrases to facilitate note taking in consecutive and unburden our working memory in simultaneous. A passing reference to counting chickens can deliver a long-winded admonition in a nutshell and help you catch up with a fast-paced speaker. Hear a speaker mention the Chinese character for “crisis”, and you know you can give your poor cramped pen hand a short break, even as you groan.

Yet Orwell sounded a warning:

If you use ready-made phrases, you not only don’t have to hunt about for words; you also don’t have to bother with the rhythms of your sentences, since these phrases are generally so arranged as to be euphonious ... By using stale metaphors, similes and idioms, you save much mental effort, at the cost of leaving your meaning vague, not only for your reader but for yourself ... [Ready-made phrases] will construct your sentences for you—even think your thoughts for you, to a certain extent—and at need they will perform the important service of partially concealing your meaning even from yourself.

It's ironic, then, to see Orwell's own words and ideas used as set phrases, particularly in direct contradiction to their original intent. How many times have you heard, read or said “Some [insert plural animate noun] are more equal than others”—used to convey, or even commend, an acceptance of inequality as a fact of life? And the sheer idea of Big Brother contests! Michael
Shelden believes that even if Orwell's work is abused in this way in our current sound-bite world, at least this desecration should eventually lead at least a few people to his works and help open people's eyes to everything Orwell warned about. I hope he’s right.

But Orwellian quotes resonate for me as an interpreter in many other ways.

If the speech [the speaker] is making is one that he is accustomed to make over and over again, he may be almost unconscious of what he is saying, as one is when one utters the responses in church.

**Been there?** Ever felt you could interpret a certain speech in your sleep? But watch out, for “this reduced state of consciousness, if not indispensable, is at any rate favourable to political conformity.” Not to mention bloopers!

When you think of a concrete object, you think wordlessly, and then, if you want to describe the thing you have been visualizing you probably hunt about until you find the exact words that seem to fit it. When you think of something abstract you are more inclined to use words from the start, and unless you make a conscious effort to prevent it, the existing dialect will come rushing in and do the job for you, at the expense of blurring or even changing your meaning.

Does this remind anyone else of Seleskovitch’s theory of deverbalization?

He unrolled the message that he had set aside earlier. It ran:

'times 3.12.83 reporting bb dayorder doubleplusungood refs unpersons rewrite fullwise upsub antefiling'

In Oldspeak (or standard English) this might be rendered:

'The reporting of Big Brother's Order for the Day in The Times of December 3rd 1983 is extremely unsatisfactory and makes references to non-existent persons. Rewrite it in full and submit your draft to higher authority before filing.'

That Newspeak message looks ominously similar to my consecutive notes, minus the all-important structure.

Here’s another:

**Doublethink** means the power of holding two contradictory beliefs in one’s mind simultaneously, and accepting both of them.

Don’t we have to do a bit of that, at least momentarily, when we interpret for speakers whose beliefs contradict our own? If we can’t entertain their line of reasoning on some plane, we’re unlikely to be able to convey it accurately, warts and all, and so we fail at our task. Is doublethink the inevitable fate of the interpreter?

The trouble with reading Orwell on language is that first it starts you thinking (always dangerous, that) and then you tend to become horribly self-conscious about every word you write. So I’ll just cut this post short and just let you mull over the rest of the quotes for yourselves.

But if thought corrupts language, language can also corrupt thought.

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.

Silly words and expressions have often disappeared, not through any evolutionary process but owing to the conscious action of a minority.

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 the word if it were tied down to any one meaning.

Language ought to be the joint creation of poets and manual workers.

A mass of Latin words falls upon the facts like soft snow, blurring the outline and covering up all the details.

For further reading, two interesting pieces on Orwell:

- New York Times: Simpler Terms; If It's 'Orwellian,' It's Probably Not
- LA Times: Orwell's 5 greatest essays: No. 1, 'Politics and the English Language'

Recommended citation format: