

# **The Shadow of Language**

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One notices, if one will trust one's eyes,  
The shadow cast by language upon truth.

W. H. Auden, "Kairos and Logos"

## **The Age of Orwell**

There is a pervasive contradiction in the way we think about language. On the one hand, there has never been an age that was so suspicious of language as ours is, or so ready to believe that language can mislead us about the true nature of things. But it's also fair to say that there's never been an age that was so susceptible to linguistic manipulation.

True, there needn't be anything paradoxical in that correlation. In general, the greater the risk, the greater the vigilance — you expect everyone to become more alert to the dangers of burglary when the crime rate goes up. But the skepticism that people bring to public language isn't simply an expression of their resistance to linguistic manipulation. In important ways, in fact, it's an accessory to it, incorporated into an official ideology of language that is endorsed and encouraged by very institutions it is supposed to be confronting. That's the paradox in modern attitudes about political language: our mistrust of it serves to put us even more at its mercy.

The ideology of political language I'm speaking of has roots stretching back to Locke and Bacon. But it wasn't until the eighteenth century that this idea acquired a recognizably modern form. In 1794, Edmund Burke excoriated the Girondin Minister Jean-Marie Roland for trying to extenuate the massacres of priests by revolutionary mobs in September of 1792. In a passage that could have been the model for some of those in Orwell's "Politics and the English Language,"

Burke charged Roland with addressing the people in an abstract vocabulary that obscured the nature of the events.

Through the whole of this long letter of Roland, it is curious to remark how the nerve and vigour of his style, which had spoken so potently to his sovereign, is relaxed, when he addresses himself to the *sans-culottes*. . . When he speaks to the populace he can no longer be direct. The whole compass of the language is tried to find sinonimies and circumlocutions for massacre and murder. Things are never called by their common names. Massacre is sometimes *agitation*, sometimes *effervescence*, sometimes *excess*; sometimes *too continued an exercise of a revolutionary power*."<sup>4</sup>

You can find complaints along these lines throughout the nineteenth century, as euphemism and indirection become routine maneuvers of governments and military leaders. In fact, both the rise of political euphemism and the increasing complaints about it mirror the growth of democracy and the widening of the public sphere. This kind of oblique language is characteristic of a discourse that is in some way constrained to be verisimilitudinous (though maybe the satirist Stephen Colbert's "truthy" might be a more accurate description). Political euphemism is only necessary when power can't get away with transparent lies or with obdurate silence. In that sense, euphemism is the tribute that mendacity pays to public opinion. And that's one reason why the concern about this language is naturally heightened in the bourgeois democracies, where the state has to accommodate the media's need for plausible information and narratives about events, and where policy is subject to the critical examination of an active public.

Complaints like Burke's were heard throughout the nineteenth century, though they really didn't become a persistent political concern until the First World War, when governments learned to exploit the full resources of the state to mobilize public opinion and the art of political and military euphemism came into its full modern flower. The mutinies among French troops in 1917 were described in dispatches as "acts of collective indiscipline," and the writers of the daily communiqués from the Western Front were instructed to use the phrase "brisk fighting" to describe any action in which more than 50 percent of a company was killed or wounded. That was when the word *propaganda* entered the everyday vocabulary. As one journalist who had been active in the American morale efforts noted: "Before 1914, 'propaganda' belonged only to literate vocabularies and possessed a reputable, dignified meaning... Two years later the word

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<sup>4</sup> Edmund Burke, "Preface to Brissot's Address to his Constituents," in L. G. Mitchell, ed., *The Writings and Speeches of Edmund Burke, Vol. VII*. Oxford, The Clarendon Press, 1989, p. 512.

had come into the vocabulary of peasants and ditch diggers and had begun to acquire its miasmic aura."<sup>5</sup>

Thus both the historical and philosophical groundwork for the modern ideology of political speech had been thoroughly laid by the time Orwell wrote *1984* and "Politics and the English Language." Still, Orwell deserves credit for giving these complaints their contemporary significance, by linking them with the specter of totalitarian states that use language not just to mask atrocities, but to make dissenting ideas literally unthinkable. In "Politics and the English Language," he wrote: "Political language — and with variations this is true of all political parties, from Conservatives to Anarchists — is designed to make lies sound truthful and murder respectable, and to give an appearance of solidity to pure wind."<sup>6</sup>

In the postwar period, this thesis became the starting-point for all critiques of political language, with the implication that the abuse of language can lead ultimately to gulags and death camps. In the process, Orwell's name has become a metonym for the predominant ideology about public discourse. I mean "metonym" in a literal way — if you drove around San Francisco during the 2004 election campaign, you would probably have seen a bumper sticker that read "Orwell and Bush in 2004." In effect, Orwell has become a writer like the medievals' Virgil, whose name is blurred with his creations. And indeed, over the course of the last fifty years, *Orwellian* has become the most widely used adjective derived from the name of a modern writer. In the press and on the Internet, it's more common than *Kafkaesque*, *Hemingwayesque* and *Dickensian* put together — it even noses out the political reproach *Machiavellian*, which had a 500-year head start.<sup>7</sup> Along the way, this ideology about language has won a kind of official sanction. Thanks to the schools, *1984* is unquestionably the best-selling political novel of modern times, at least in English. (The novel shows up every fall and spring in the Amazon.com list of fiction bestsellers, as high-school and college students order the books for their English classes.)<sup>8</sup>

Over the decades, the words *Orwellian* and *Newspeak* have been progressively detached from the historical context that gave rise to them. Newspeak may have been a plausible-sounding invention in 1948, when totalitarian thought control seemed a real and even imminent possibility.

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<sup>5</sup> Will Irwin, *Propaganda and the News*. New York: McGraw-Hill, 1936.

<sup>6</sup> Orwell, "Politics," p. 967.

<sup>7</sup> And not only in English. Google reports 107,000 hits in Italian pages for *orwelliano* (including its variants *orwelliana*, etc.), against about 81,000 for *machiavellico*.

<sup>8</sup> According to the Amazon.com rankings of *1984* as of this writing, in May of 2009, it outsells both *Candide* and *The Plague* in France, *Lord of the Flies* and *Brave New World* in the UK, *Catch-22* and *Fahrenheit 451* in the US, and *The Castle* and *Buddenbrooks* in Germany.

But the collapse of Communism revealed the bankruptcy not just of the Stalinists' social and economic experiment, but of their linguistic experiments as well. After 75 years of incessant propaganda, "socialist man" turned out to be a cynic who didn't even believe the train schedules.

Yet both *Newspeak* and *Orwellian* are as widely used today as they were twenty years ago. Indeed, the words have become more powerful as their historical background has faded (nowadays, students tend to think of 1984's Oceania as just another fantastic dystopia like the worlds of *The Matrix*, *Blade Runner*, or *V for Vendetta*). And if Orwell's ideas about language originally reflected his sympathies with the anticommunist left, they are now accepted unreservedly by all sides, if rarely in the spirit of self-criticism that Orwell himself encouraged. The American left hears Orwellian resonances in names like the USA PATRIOT Act or the Department of Homeland Security's Operation Liberty Shield, which authorized indefinite detention of asylum-seekers from certain nations. The right hears them in "reproductive health services," "Office of Equality Assurance," and "English Plus" for bilingual education. It may be a matter of debate as to which of those terms are actually deceptive packaging and which are merely effective branding, but everyone shares the same general picture of the way political language can deceive. The assumptions and values that are implicit in the word *Orwellian* are part of an ideology that attaches to political discourse itself, rather than to any position within that discourse.

It's a striking feature of the dominant linguistic ideology that while it seems to encourage a skeptical and questioning attitude towards language, it tends to reinforce a sense that one is personally immune to linguistic manipulation. Modern complaints about Orwellian language always presuppose an uncritical or passive public. In "Politics and the English Language," Orwell says that "a reduced state of consciousness [is] favorable to political conformity." And in one of his BBC radio broadcasts in 1944, he wondered at Italians' apparent willingness to accept the absurdities broadcast on Mussolini's Fascist radio, like the claim that Britain was on the edge of collapse: "For quite long periods. . . people can remain undisturbed by obvious lies, either because they simply forget what is said from day to day or because they are under such a constant propaganda bombardment that they become anaesthetized to the whole business."<sup>9</sup>

The idea here is that it requires a conscious effort to see through to the nature of things, and not let "the existing dialect... come rushing in and do the job for you," as Orwell puts it. But on the face of things, the very prominence and ubiquity of Orwell's ideas about language seems to belie the idea of a public that's passive, gullible, or anaesthetized to propaganda and political

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<sup>9</sup> George Orwell, "As I Please." *London Tribune*, June 2, 1944.

euphemism. There's always an undercurrent of condescension when people describe some bit of language as Orwellian: "Mind you, I'm not fooled for an instant, but the man in the street is sure to fall for it." But these days, even that elusive character "the man in the street" is likely to be skeptical of what he hears from politicians, whichever side they're on. Nowadays there are no proles, only consumers who are as adept at evaluating a political ad or a debate performance as a tire commercial. Hence the paradox of our attitudes about political language: everyone believes that he's inured to the mischief that language can work, but that most of the other people in the room is susceptible to it. But as advertisers know well, no audience is easier to beguile than one that's smugly confident of its own sophistication. And the ideology of language implicit in the word *Orwellian* makes certain forms of linguistic deception even easier to achieve.

### "X is called Y"

At the root of that ideology is a deceptively simple semantic theory — one that is implicit in the tropes that define modern criticism of political language. Recall the final sentences of that passage from Burke I mentioned earlier:

The whole compass of the language is tried to find sinonimies and circumlocutions for massacre and murder. Things are never called by their common names. Massacre is sometimes *agitation*, sometimes *effervescence*, sometimes *excess*; sometimes *too continued an exercise of a revolutionary power*.

As I noted, this passage seems to directly prefigure several passages in Orwell's essay "Politics and the English Language," most famously:

Defenceless villages are bombarded from the air, the inhabitants driven out into the countryside, the cattle machine-gunned, the huts set on fire with incendiary bullets: this is called *pacification*. Millions of peasants are robbed of their farms and sent trudging along the roads with no more than they can carry: this is called *transfer of population* or *rectification of frontiers*.<sup>11</sup>

I want to focus on the device that both writers use here, the statement of the form "An X is called a Y" or simply "An X is a Y," where X is written in a straightforward way and Y is a putative synonym or replacement for X that is set off typographically in italics or quotations.<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>11</sup> Orwell, "Politics," p. 963.

<sup>12</sup> One could perhaps locate the birth of this trope in the famous words that Tacitus put in the mouth of the British chieftain Calgacus on the eve of his battle with the Romans: "Robbery, butchery, and rapine the liars call empire; they make a desert and call it peace" ("Ubi solitudinem

Let me give a couple more examples of this trope, the first from an article by the noted lexicographer Robert Burchfield and the second by conservative critic and philosopher Roger Scruton:

...the aged tend to be called senior citizens, backward children are said to be mentally handicapped or educationally subnormal, and juvenile lawbreakers are sent to approved schools.<sup>13</sup>

When Lenin and his band of bolsheviks took power, they... believed that their task would be impeded not only by the bourgeoisie, but also by the Russian language, which had hitherto been steeped in bourgeois ideology.... The old language of human relations was also to be purified: "proletarian solidarity" took the place of individual friendship (indeed, friendship between individuals became something like a contradiction in terms).<sup>14</sup>

These passages are utterly banal and unremarkable: you can find analogous complaints in just about any Sunday supplement language column: "torture becomes *enhanced interrogation techniques*"; "the Iraqi civil war is described as *sectarian violence aimed at expressing differences*"; "assisted suicide is called 'aid in dying'": and so on. And the figure is no less common in other language-communities, as witness these examples from a conservative Italian critic and a left-wing German critic:

On the terrorist who hijacks a Boeing we have placed the Salgariesque [i.e., adventure-story] aura of an "air pirate," on the dynamiter who mangles living people the romantic aura of a "guerilla." I believe that through calling things by the wrong names we will wind up no longer recognizing the things. Semantic deviations lead to a creeping moral deviation.<sup>15</sup>

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faciunt, pacem appellant"). This may be, though it isn't clear whether Tacitus actually endorses the accusations of Calgacus, who was after all about to confront Tacitus's own father-in-law Agricola in battle.

<sup>13</sup> Robert Burchfield, "An Outline History of Euphemisms in English." In D. J. Enright, ed., *Euphemisms*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1985, p. 14.

<sup>14</sup> Roger Scruton, "Ideologically Speaking." In Leonard Michaels and Christopher Ricks, eds., *The State of the Language*. Berkeley: The University of California Press, 1990, p. 125.

<sup>15</sup> "I popoli forti non hanno paura delle parole forti (come non hanno paura delle azioni forti), gli altri le spalmano di eufanismi, vasellina del pensiero. ... Sul terrorista che dirotta un BoEing abbiamo posato l'aureola salgariana di pirata dell'area, dul dinamitardo che strazia vite umane quella romantica di guerrigliero. Penso che a forza di chiamare le cose con nomi sbagliati, fineremo col non riconoscere più le cose. La deviazione semantic favorisce una strisciante deviazione morale." Cesare Marchi, *Il Delatore*. Milan: Editoriale Nuova, 1981, p. 11.

Massacres by the superpowers in Nicaragua and Afghanistan are called "acts of pacification", plutonium factories and reprocessing plants for atomic waste are called *Entsorgungsparks* (lit. "parks where peoples' worries are removed")<sup>16</sup>

The formula used here is identical to the one we use to explain or introduce a foreign word ("A mop is a *trapeador*"), and its ostensible function is analogous: it denaturalizes the italicized or quoted expressions on the right-hand side, so as to suggest that it is illegitimate, not properly a part of "our" language. But idea in the political case is not simply that different languages have different names for things, but that things have two kinds of names: true names that correspond to their true natures, and false names that obscure or misrepresent their natures. The true names are the words which everybody uses in everyday conversation, Burke's "common names," like *aged* and *massacre*; the false names are those drawn from learned or bureaucratic registers, like "acts of pacification" and "senior citizens."<sup>17</sup>

Writers most commonly explicate this distinction in terms of words that are "concrete" and "abstract." Concrete words, as Orwell and others describe them, are those that are immediately connected to the perceptible properties of concrete objects — the names that suggest themselves when we are *en rapport* with things, to use a term of David Kaplan's:

When you think of a concrete object, you think wordlessly, and then, if you want to describe the thing you have been visualising 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.<sup>18</sup>

Aldous Huxley (that other great 20<sup>th</sup>-century British dystopianist) made a similar point in language that suggests a debt to Russellian positivism:

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<sup>16</sup> H. E. Brekele, "War with Words," in Ruth Wodak, ed., *Language Power and Ideology: Studies in Political Discourse*. Amsterdam, Benjamins, 1989, p. 88.

<sup>17</sup> In other contexts and periods, "false names" may include words from classical languages or from foreign languages that are used in native discourse. In the eighteenth century, for example, English-language critics objected to the use of French words like *hauteur* for haughtiness and *belles-lettres* for polite literature using just this formula, even as contemporary critics from other Western European language communities use the formula to object to the influx of English terms.

<sup>18</sup> George Orwell, "Politics and the English Language," in John Carey, ed. *Essays of George Orwell*. New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2002, pp. 965-6.

Now, all these various universes in which we live are members of one or other of two super-universes; the universe of direct experience and the universe of words. When I look at this paper in my hand I have a direct sensuous experience. . . . I may open my mouth, and, making use of a certain system of signs, called the English language, I may impart the information that my experience consisted of whiteness mitigated by rows of black marks which I recognize as belonging to the alphabetical system by means of which spoken language can be rendered in terms of a visible equivalent.

Huxley goes on to distinguish between "words which designate definite and easily recognizable objects and qualities," such as *table*, and words which are "highly abstract," such as *science* or *society*; the latter "the cause of endless intellectual confusion, endless emotional distress, endless misdirections of voluntary effort."

Now on the face of things there is nothing new in this picture of the relation between language and perceived reality. It recalls the tradition of Lockean idealism, with its contention that concrete words are the expressions of "sensible ideas" — that is, primary sensations of taste, touch, or appearance — and that more abstract (what Locke called "abstruse") words are built up out of these ideas and are at a progressive remove from those sensations. As Locke puts this in book III of the *Essay Concerning Human Understanding*:

. . . we remark how great a dependence our words have on common sensible ideas; and how those which are made use of to stand for actions and notions quite removed from sense, have their rise from thence, and from obvious sensible ideas are transferred to more abstruse significations, and made to stand for ideas that come not under the cognizance of our senses.<sup>19</sup>

Locke himself was mindful of the risks of abstraction, where words might become disconnected from their basis in sensible ideas so that, as he put it, "they remain empty sounds, with little or no signification." In his chapter "Of the Abuse of Words," Locke enumerated the ways in which this sort of rupture could become the instrument of misconception and deception. He talks about the coining of new words by "sects of philosophy and religion" that chiefly "support some strange opinions, or cover some weakness of their hypothesis....[These] may justly be called insignificant terms." He mentions the distortion of the meaning of old words, which can "charm men into notions far remote from the truth of things." And he asks, "How else comes it to

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<sup>19</sup> John Locke, *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding*. Toronto: Dover, 1959. II, p. 5.

pass that princes, speaking or writing to their servants, in their ordinary commands are easily understood; speaking to their people, in their laws, are not so?"<sup>20</sup>

For Orwell, the "concreteness" of true names is the source of their sensory vividness, which is what gives them moral weight:

People are imprisoned for years without trial, or shot in the back of the neck or sent to die of scurvy in Arctic lumber camps: this is called *elimination of unreliable elements*. Such phraseology is needed if one wants to name things without calling up mental pictures of them.<sup>21</sup>

Elsewhere in the essay, Orwell talks about "a mass of Latin words falls upon the facts like soft snow, blurring the outlines and covering up all the details." In that sense, the mechanism that's described here is simply the linguistic analogue of psychic repression. The idea is that words like *elimination* or *pacification*, which are at a greater remove from the world of the sensible, manage to refer to things without evoking them.

All of this rests on the assumption is that it's possible to determine the difference between the two kinds of names, through a kind of pre-linguistic examination of the world that lets us perceive the nature of things without linguistic mediation. And in fact Orwells suggest that this is what people ordinarily do in the kind of pre-political discourse that isn't manipulated or distorted by the language of power, Burke's "common names." At that point, it's true, one might object that one can never really "think wordlessly," and have a direct and unmediated perception of the phenomenal world — that is, that we can never see through to what W. H. Auden called "the bright and brutal surfaces of things." A lot of linguists and psychologists would argue that our perceptions of even of the most concrete notions like "kick" or "ball" are mediated by language, which is always in the background, highlighting some features of reality and suppressing others. Show speakers of English and speakers of Indonesian a photograph of a man's foot kicking a ball and they'll store it in memory differently, according to the particular distinctions that their languages make available.<sup>22</sup>

But that objection isn't relevant here. Orwell is making an ideological point, not a philosophical one, and for those purposes what a Lockean might call "concrete" vocabulary is has

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<sup>20</sup> Locke, *Essay*, II, p. 122

<sup>21</sup> Orwell, "Politics and the English Language," p. 964.

<sup>22</sup> See Lera Boroditsky, Wendy Ham, and Michael Ramscar, "What is universal in event perception? Comparing English & Indonesian speakers," In W. D. Gray and C. D. Schunn (Editors), *Proceedings of the 24th Annual Meeting of the Cognitive Science Society (2002)*, pp. 136-1441.

no role to play. When Burke, Orwell and others deploy that "X is Y" formula, the X word is never a genuinely concrete word like *paper* or *stony* or *sneeze*; such words rarely have any political or ideological significance. (Somebody might ridicule you for describing something as "lithic" rather than stony or for calling a sneeze a "sternutation," but the objection to the fancier words is simply that they're pretentious, not that they misrepresent reality.) They're complex words like *massacre*, *torture*, *terrorist*, and *suicide*, which are themselves composed of complex ideas and are at a several removes from the domain of Locke's "sensible ideas." The OED defines *massacre* as "The indiscriminate and brutal slaughter of people" and *brutal* as "coarsely cruel, savage, fierce," and so forth — none of them properties that can be read off the surfaces of things. Not that you couldn't ultimately reduce *massacre* to some cluster of sensible semantic primitives, but it would be a very long way down. So if we have the impression that *massacre* is somehow more "concrete" than *pacification*, it's only because it conjures up familiar narratives and "natural" values.

Indeed, when you hear someone using the "X is called Y" formula to make a complaint, the orthographically unmarked expression on the left is itself invariably a value-saturated and socially constructed notion — often, in fact, one that would have appeared on the right-hand side of the equation just a generation or two earlier. (Some time ago I saw an article in the review *Commentary* that contained the sentence, "In short, he is what the layman would call a sociopath.") And the function of the trope is not simply to stress the exotic or artificial character of the term on the right, but to naturalize the one on the left, not because it's less abstract, but because it represents what Burke describes as the "common names" of things. That is, the trope claims a privileged place for the categories that appear to emerge from ordinary, prereflective experience, as against the categories that are constructed in processes of conscious intellection — for *friendship* as opposed to *proletarian solidarity*, *aged* as opposed to *senior citizens*, and so forth. In this sense, it confirms the status of certain names as what Barthes called "natural" language — that is, as he puts it, "language which feigns ignorance of the fact of its nature as language."

Now it goes without saying that there are often ethically valid objections to the "uncommon" names that appear on the right side of these equations, particularly when they reflect an effort to appropriate authority over a domain of experience from the discourse that it properly belongs to. When a company issues a public announcement of "force reductions through involuntary methodologies," for example, we're certainly within our rights to conclude that they're deliberately avoiding a common word like *layoffs*, and that their choice of phrasing suggests an effort to absolve themselves of personal responsibility for the decision. (If there's an

invisible hand that moves the market, there sometimes seems to be an invisible mouth that speaks for it, too.) I confess I am not sure whether a proper Orwellian skepticism really arms us against this kind of talk: what makes modern corporations and state bureaucracies far more linguistically effective than their Stalinist or Oceanic analogues is that they understand how jargon and euphemism can perform their work even when employees and citizens are permitted — or indeed, encouraged — to ridicule it privately. People know perfectly well that expressions like *friendly fire*, *headcount reduction*, and *senior citizen are* just substitutes for more direct expressions, but even so they seem to keep the unpalatable facts of life and death at bay.

### **Final Words**

But neither this trope nor the doctrine it stands in for would be effective as an ideological maneuver if they didn't ultimately rest on plausible ethical intuitions. What's important is that in the course of raising reasonable objections to the sorts of language that people describe as doublespeak and jargon, the doctrine also fosters a certain delusion about "natural" language: the idea that if you transact your discourse in language that is "simple and direct," it is secured against manipulation. And in that way the Orwellian ideology itself becomes an agent of self-deception — it denies the possibility that there are contradictions and questionable assumptions built into the names that we think of as "plain" or "common," which it tries to remove from the field of contestation.

When I speak of "common names," I'm thinking in particular of the everyday words that Richard Rorty called our "final vocabulary."

All human beings carry about a set of words which they employ to justify their actions, their beliefs, and their lives. These are the words in which we formulate praise of our friends and contempt for our enemies, our long-term projects, our deepest self-doubts and our highest hopes. They are the words in which we tell, sometimes prospectively and sometimes retrospectively, the story of our lives. I shall call these words a person's "final vocabulary."

It is "final" in the sense that if doubt is cast on the worth of these words, their user has no noncircular argumentative recourse. Those words are as far as he can go with language; beyond them there is only helpless passivity or a resort to force. A small part of a final vocabulary is made up of thin, flexible, and ubiquitous terms such as "true," "good," "right," and "beautiful." The larger part contains thicker, more rigid, and more parochial terms, for example, "Christ," "England," "professional standards," "decency," "kindness," "the Revolution," "the Church," "progressive," "rigorous," "creative." The more parochial terms do most of the work.<sup>23</sup>

There is a final vocabulary specific to politics. In recent American discourse, it consists of words like *conservative* and *liberal*, *choice* and *freedom*, *values* and *tradition*, *bias* and *elite*, *diversity* and *discrimination* — not to mention *Orwellian*. Words like these can be defined and critically analyzed at endless length, of course; they not primitive terms like *red* or *pain*, which can't really be explained in other words without circularity. But when people use the words in their ordinary conversation, they're not open to discussion, no more than *acceptable* is when a mother tells her child, "That's not acceptable behavior." They're used to put a claim beyond the reach of argument: *What do you expect from a liberal?*; *The employees freely chose to work there.*

By definition, the words of our political vocabulary are not subject to criticism via the Orwellian formula I have been talking about, "An X is called a Y." No one complains in an Orwellian way that "Historically determined prejudices are called 'traditional,'" for example, not because it mightn't be true, but because while people may argue about traditional values, they don't regard the word *traditional* itself as illegitimate, the way they do a phrase like "collateral damage." (In fact the American left has often made an effort to wrest the word from the right: you hear people talk about "traditional progressive values," with no apparent sense that there might be anything oxymoronic in the phrase.)

In that sense, these words function like proverbs; the only way to answer them is with other words of the same kind. When someone says "absence makes the heart grow fonder," you don't argue with it; you just cite another proverb like "Out of sight, out of mind." And like proverbs, these words don't really mean so much as they evoke: they draw their power from their ability to conjure up scenarios, images or moral tales. How do you teach someone the meaning of *appeasement*, say? You could read her the dictionary definition: "The policy of granting concessions to potential enemies to maintain peace," as the *American Heritage* puts it. But if that

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<sup>23</sup> Richard Rorty, "Private irony and liberal hope," in *Contingency and Solidarity*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989, p. 73.

definition were all there is to it, *appeasement* would be a fair and by no means critical description of both the Clinton and Bush administration's policies towards North Korea or Iran — literally speaking, appeasement is just a matter of trying to cut a deal to avoid a destructive confrontation. That's how people used to use the word, in fact, very often in an approving way; Churchill himself advocated a policy of "prudence and appeasement" towards the Turks when they went to war with the Greeks in 1919.

But after Munich, *appeasement* could only stand in for the danger of pusillanimous capitulation to the insatiable demands of a tyrant. The word comes with a series of film stills attached to it: Chamberlain with his silly high collar, striped pants and drooping moustache, Hitler's face superimposed over goose-stepping German troops, Churchill glaring defiantly over his cigar. When Condoleezza Rice used the word in 2003 to describe the French and Germans' reluctance to go to war over Saddam's alleged weapons of mass destruction, it wasn't a charge anyone could answer by arguing that the historical analogy wasn't really very apt (Churchill never advocated going to war with Hitler in 1938, for one thing). It was simply part of a semantic blitzkrieg aimed at seizing the moral high ground for the administration, and there was no way to counter it except with an equally potent symbol that connoted rash bellicosity.

It's easy to see how that works with a word like *appeasement*, which conjures up a specific story and which isn't much used anymore in a literal way — it's one of those words that have grown capital letters, like *stonewalling* and *isolationism*. But the principle is the same for most other words that play the most important part in political life — not just the obvious symbol-words like *freedom* or manufactured tags like "the war on terror," but most of the ordinary language that people use when they're making political judgments, like *liberal*, *values*, *bias*, *government*, and *traditional*. It's as misleading to look for the political meaning of *liberal* in the dictionary as it is for *appeasement*. "An advocate or adherent of liberalism" doesn't begin to account for the Volvo-driving, latte-sipping, tree-hugging stereotypes that the word trails behind it. The words function purely as symbols, in the way that Walter Lippmann used the term: they reduce complex issues to charged terms that "assemble emotions after they have been detached from their ideas."<sup>24</sup>

Most of the words I've mentioned here are in some manner contested — used by one side in an aggressive way to discount the views of the other side, which is in the position of having to discredit or appropriate them. But there is a much larger body of final vocabulary which has no

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<sup>24</sup> Walter Lippmann, *Public Opinion*. New York: Free Press, 1966 [1922], p. 151.

particular partisan valence, and which is used by everyone in more-or-less the same way. Take the opposition between *force* and *violence*. This difference first caught my attention back at the time of the Rodney King riots in 1992, when I was listening to the statement that President George H. W. Bush made when he sent 4500 troops to Los Angeles: "Let me assure you, I will use whatever force is necessary to restore order. I guarantee you, this violence will end." The statement makes one aspect of the distinction very clear: force is the prerogative of official power; violence is the desperate expedient of the powerless. It isn't just a question of justification or legitimacy. People use *force* even when power is abused. Saddam Hussein tried to take Kuwait by force. Police who beat up a suspect are charged with "excessive use of force." But it is violence when rioters pulled a driver from his truck and beat him, or when insurgents set off a car bomb in Karachi.

That distinction has a curious grammatical reflex. We very often see *violence* used as the subject of a sentence: "Political violence flared anew in Haiti"; "A wave of violence has swept over the country," "As violence rocked Pakistan this week..." Violence breaks out, flares, erupts, explodes, escalates, ebbs. We talk about it as if it were a thing with a life of its own, a kind of eczema on the social order; the human actors are anonymous or irrelevant, like the passive hosts of a disease that is made visible only in its eruptions. Whereas force doesn't do anything by itself. *Force* is almost always the object of the verb: somebody uses force, deploys force, exercises force. Again, you can see the difference in Bush's statement: "I will use whatever force is necessary...I assure you, this violence will end."

This is a straightforward example of the way language can occlude the common essence of things. And I pick this example simply because it's one that nobody finds problematic or tendentious. We all implicitly acknowledge a difference between the physical aggression that's exercised by those in power and the physical aggression that's exercised by the powerless, to the point of talking about the two as if they were different things. And while we can perceive the obvious commonalities between the things we describe with the two words — between rioters beating up a truck driver and policemen beating up a suspect, say — it's actually rather difficult to find a single word or phrase that comprehends them both ("physical aggression" is the best I can come up with, but it's clearly not exact).<sup>25</sup>

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<sup>25</sup> In fact you find dictionaries defining each word in terms of the other, though that's generally considered bad lexicographical practice. Merriam-Webster's defines *violence* as "exertion of physical force so as to injure or abuse" and *force* as "violence, compulsion, or constraint exerted upon or against a person or thing."

I don't mean to suggest that there's anything necessarily spurious about drawing a distinction between force and violence the way we do, but only that we have little individual choice in the matter, even if we might prefer to draw it somewhere else. Language always imposes a certain system of categorization — it sews its seams into the undifferentiated kapok of experience, creating the distinctions that correspond to the "common names" of things. And to a certain extent the seams can't be unsewn; there's no way of speaking that doesn't commit us to the topography of experience that's implicit in the language.

But "common names" can be denaturalized, and divested of their finality. Sometimes events will force the issue, when they create an incidental semantic dilemma. Looking at the images from Katrina, we were forced to confront the subtleties of "looting," a term that people had used in previous disasters and civil disturbances in a generally uncritical way. But all of a sudden we were asking ourselves whether it was right to use the same verb for carrying off a flat-screen TV from a Best Buy and taking diapers from a convenience store, particularly when the authorities had made such a mess of the relief efforts. Of course the looters should be shot, the *Wall Street Journal's* Peggy Noonan said. But by looters she meant the people who were taking what they wanted and not simply what they needed — a distinction that led one editor to ask how the troops were to determine whether someone who had taken battery-operated power tools from a hardware store was intending to sell them or to free his grandmother from the attic. Or to take another case, the aid-in-dying movement has rejected the word *suicide* to describe the choice made by end-of-life patients because of its connotations of desperation and mental unbalance. Opponents of laws permitting doctors to assist in the process have denounced this avoidance of *suicide* as a verbal trick, but their argument is weakened by the fact that the New York City medical examiner's office demurred from listing suicide as the cause of death for any of the people who jumped from the World Trade Center on 9/11, choosing instead to record them as homicides. Why should the choice to end one's life in the face of certain and imminent death count as suicide in one case and not the other? Whichever position one takes, the word can no longer be taken for granted.

*Looting* and *suicide* have lost their finality. They no longer belong to the uncritical moral vocabulary — people are now obliged to defend their choice to use the words. And what fortuitous events can accomplish, pointed criticism can also achieve. The object, then, should be not to unsew these seams, but to make them more conspicuous, so that people are obliged to reflect before choosing one or the other term. So for example politicians and journalists can describe nations as having governments or regimes, according to how stable or legitimate their governments are judged to be, but the choice should be considered, not reflexive. In press reports,

Latin America invariably has "democratic regimes"; while Europe has "democracies," but the implications of the distinction are never discussed.

In fact if any word is desperately in need of denaturalization, it's *Orwellian* itself. The word does useful work as a tag for the inflated, the circuitous, and the indirect, but it also encourages us to think that we are secure against manipulation so long as we reject complex or pretentious phrases in favor of language that is common and plain. And as such it blinds us to ways in which "plain words" color our own thinking. When we picture what Frederic Jameson called "the prison-house of language," it's almost always from the outside looking in. But when you look back on the political history of the past half-century or so, it's the plain-speakers that have worked the most mischief — the men who pronounce *freedom* in a tone of voice that suggests that the idea should be clear to anyone except the clever people who make everything too complicated: "You see, the terrorists hate freedom." You think of the comment that Cornwall makes in Act II Scene II of *Lear* in response to Kent's averring, "'tis my occupation to be plain":

These kind of knaves I know, which in this plainness  
Harbour more craft and more corrupter ends  
Than twenty silly ducking observants  
That stretch their duties nicely.