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Through a Telescreen, darkly

By Lavinia Marin

'It was a peculiarly beautiful book. Its smooth creamy paper, a little yellowed by age, was of a kind that had not been manufactured for at least forty years past. (...) Even with nothing written in it, it was a compromising possession. The thing that he was about to do was to open a diary. This was not illegal (nothing was illegal, since there were no longer any laws), but if detected it was reasonably certain that it would be punished by death, or at least by twenty-five years in a forced-labour camp'.

The Party fears blank paper. On every street corner, one can find newspapers printed with propaganda but blank paper, now that is nearly impossible to find. For nearly half a century no more notebooks were produced, no blank papers allowed to touch the hands of the masses. This restriction seems odd. Why is blank paper dangerous? What is treacherous about a nice leather-bound book with creamy pages?

The very act of writing on a blank paper is Thoughtcrime and Winston knows it. The intriguing question for us is: what is at stake in the potential of a blank page? There is political potential in a blank page, it could contain a subversive message that could be passed on to others, yet blank paper to write on is much weaker than having a manual printing press hidden in a basement. If Winston wanted to instigate rebellion against the Party, he would not handwrite manifestos, he would need to print them somehow. There is something else going on with writing one's thoughts in a notebook, and that is related to Newspeak. The claim I am making here is that, as long as people will continue to write, Newspeak will never catch on. Here is why.

Newspeak for everyday life

Newspeak is an artificial language which needs to become the official language of Oceania by 2050. Quite an ambitious project, to say the least. There is a saying among linguists that every language is a dialect with an army and a navy. Oceania does not lack an army nor a navy, however, is military power enough to make of Newspeak a proper language? The main problem with Newspeak lies in its artificial nature. This is where the folly of the Party's project comes to the fore: the Oceanians are supposed to adopt an artificial language and use it as a natural one. Newspeak is not just another artificial language like Esperanto, it is an impoverished language which does not tolerate multiple meanings and this makes it harder to adopt. Yet Newspeak must be spoken if the Party wants to perpetuate its political system forever. Big Brother's well-being depends directly on the ability of his subjects to speak this cartoonish language which sounds so much like the quacking of the duck.

How can an artificial language like Newspeak effectively become the only language for everyday use? To clarify this, we must first understand what makes Newspeak special among artificial languages and what is the philosophical difficulty which confronts the proponents of Newspeak. The main purpose of Newspeak, as Syme tells Winston, is to "narrow the range of thought", to make certain thoughts impossible to think – especially what they classify as "crimethought". This narrowing is pursued by destroying words, "cutting the language down to the bone". However, no matter how talented the writers of Newspeak dictionaries are, no matter how great their language design is, they will hit an insurmountable difficulty when people will actually start using this language in everyday life.

Natural languages have a way of uncontrolled expansion, of forking words into multiple meanings, of becoming vague and slippery. For example, think of the expression 'The Man'. It started from a very banal noun, 'man', but now it means the established order, the oppressive group represented by a faceless noun; however, when not capitalised, it has the value of a compliment 'you're the man!'. Orthography makes it easier to see these two meanings apart, but it is ultimately the context which separates them. In 1984, the characters speak of the Party as 'they'. Just 'they'. In an actual conversation, the speakers know automatically when 'they' it is not a simple pronoun, meaning the Party, and when it's just about a group of ordinary people, without the negative connotations. Once a new word is released into the world, its meaning cannot be controlled or predicted. This is what

makes natural language so poetic and complex: words have multiple meanings which cannot be exhausted by dictionary definitions.

Taming natural language with rules

Already from the early 20th century, the vagueness of natural language posed problems to philosophers such as Bertrand Russell who had tried to reduce all philosophy to symbolic logic. The idea behind such an attempt was that, if you can reduce every proposition to its logical equivalent, then you can calculate its truth value and potentially decide every philosophical problem via logical computation. This was already a utopian project back then, because natural language, like a living being, twists and turns, develops new meanings as you study it, new uses for old words, old words die, not to mention the ironic or sarcastic uses. Natural language is an untameable mess so Russell and Whitehead gave up this project.

A few years after Bertrand Russell had given up the hope of taming natural language with logic, one of his students took up this project again. Ludwig Wittgenstein was the disciple that surpassed his master. Up to Wittgenstein, the dominant idea in philosophy of language was that each word should point to one thing from the real world. In his later philosophy, Wittgenstein described this misconception as the idea that “the words in language name objects” so, basically, for every word there is an object out there to which the word points. Hence, if we want to understand a sentence, we must decompose it in its words, look for the objects (or properties, relations, etc.) that correspond for each word, and then combine these all over again to understand the meaning of the sentence. This naïve picture of language was prevailing in philosophy of language already from thinkers like Augustine of Hippo. But if this picture of language were true, how do we know the meaning of sentences about fictional objects, vague words, or just words used ironically? All sorts of problems appear if we stick with this compositional view. In opposition to this philosophical tradition, Wittgenstein made a breakthrough in philosophy of language by advancing the idea that “meaning is use”.

Instead of trying to reduce natural language to logical sentences, Wittgenstein made the reverse move and put natural language first. We first learn to speak, and only later we come to analyse our words, breaking them into logical or grammatical rules. Logics, grammar, and philosophy come only later, post-factum, after the speech is performed, to make an

artificial separation out of the natural flow of speech. Language is just the abstract way in which we came to theorise the flow of speech. The idea of meaning as use was brilliantly simple: how do we know that we have learnt a word? When we can use it in multiple contexts and others understand us. Being able to hold a conversation which includes a certain word and being able to perform actions starting from that word is good enough proof that we know it. We don't even need the dictionary definition to "know" what the word means.

The traditional idea of language inherited from Augustine was that we learn the language one word at a time, usually by pointing at things: this is a telescreen, this is a piece of chocolate, this is Big Brother. But Wittgenstein came up with the idea that we learn the words always embedded in a complex of gestures and actions, even emotions. When a kid is told by his mother "this is Big Brother!", there is a pointing gesture at his picture, but there is also happiness on the parent's face. The kid not only learns what Big Brother is, but the correct attitude of happiness and respect towards this comrade. Thus, we never learn the meaning of a word neutrally, as if the word is isolated in a void from other words, we learn exactly at the same time what to do with that word: if it's Big Brother, you stand up and clap, you smile, you show love, etc. We know what a "big brother" is when we know how to do the right actions around his image, and when others approve us for this. Even if we can't define Big Brother according to the dictionary definition, it's all right as long as we perform the correct actions with this word. The expression that Wittgenstein used for this complex of speaking while acting was "form of life". The idea was quite ingenious: you learn to speak in a certain way because you learn to live in a certain way. A way of life leads to a way of speaking and vice-versa. We do not first learn to live and then to speak, as if these were separate stages. We learn how to act and speak at the same time, and this makes things very complicated for philosophers of language who wanted to just analyse words separate from deeds.

However, if meaning is use for many words, what will the inventors of Newspeak do with their dictionary full of dead definitions? The language experts may define "goodthinkful" any way they like in the 11th edition, they still need to find a way of making this definition stick to some practices. The inventors of Newspeak need to make it part of a way of life. This is where they will face another difficulty. Wittgenstein already pointed out that there are many ways of living, hence many ways of speaking. The same words will be used

differently as these occur in different forms of life. The problem with forms of life is that these are multiple, not just across cultures, but even inside the same culture. We live in so many ways, we do so many things, and words follow this multiplicity of living. Words need to have multiple meanings to be able to accommodate the many ways of usage. In order to impose Newspeak as the one way of speaking, the Party needs to impose one way of life, and then freeze it like this forever. Is this even possible?

Wittgenstein was aware that one of the major problems with his theory of meaning as use was the changeable nature of the forms of life. If people learn from their parents the right way to speak and to act, how does change even appear? Why are we not propagating the same way of life for eternity? Imagine a world where the children live exactly the same life as their parents did, in which one could not tell the difference between the 1980s and the 1990s or the 2000s. This would be a very bizarre world indeed, for it would be a world where the past and the present blend together in the same indistinct strip of time. It would be a world without history, where the passage of time makes no difference. But wait, this world already exists, it is Oceania in 1984. Winston, one of the few Oceanians who actively tries to remember things, repeatedly has trouble with the time-line, he is not sure what year it is and when the things from his past actually happened. It would seem that the Party is halfway there on its quest to impose a unique way of life by erasing the past and, with it, the memory of other forms of life.

The medium of Newspeak

In theory, the Party has all the force it needs to impose Newspeak. But is terror enough? If it were so simple to coerce everyone to the same form of life and hence to the same language, other historical conquerors would have done it already. We only need to think of Poland's history under successive German, Russian and Austrian occupations. Why was there still a Polish way of life and a Polish language despite so many centuries of occupations? Military powers come and go all the time, yet people live their lives indifferent to the historical catastrophes that surround them. Why should Oceania under Party ruling be any different? This is where Orwell's dystopian novel offers an interesting answer which eluded even Wittgenstein: the key lies in the dominant media used for communication.

People who remember words are not by themselves a problem for the Party. When Winston went to a prole's pub, he met an old man who could remember words from the old times, such as "pint" instead of a half of a litre, or a "top-hat" or a "lackey". However, the old man cannot recollect how life was before, he cannot answer the fundamental question troubling Winston: was life before really worse? The old man remembers useless words, just floating residues in his memory which will be washed away with beer. The old man cannot make sense of what these words meant, he cannot say anything about the way of life which included pints of beer and top hats because he cannot integrate his old life into a history, he cannot give it meaning. Perhaps he needed to write about it to remember.

When Winston first crouched with his notebook into the corner of his room, in that blind-spot where the telescreen could not observe him, he knew that he was committing something unpardonable. To write in a notebook one's private thoughts was an offence, unwritten in any law for "nothing was illegal, since there were no longer any laws". When Winston first wrote his words, it was a mess of disparate sentences, it had no meaning, just him 'recording' what he saw that day. But, as his writing progresses daily, Winston's thoughts become more coherent, he can say on paper what bothers him, he is starting to articulate the problem with the Oceanian way of life. He first needed to write about it in order to see it.

Writing and speech

There is a reason why Newspeak is not called Newlanguage. In Oceania, the favourite medium promoted by the Party is bound to orality (speech either in direct form or as heard on the telescreen). Writing (and consequently print) is only secondary, kept more out of inertia because people like Winston still know how to read and you cannot unlearn that. The status of print in the Oceanian society is shady at best. There are newspapers and books of dubious quality. News is "written" by dictating into the speakwrite machine. Books of fiction are composed by machines. Effectively nobody puts pen to paper anymore. Writing seems like the most removed activity from the life of Oceania. Even though Newspeak is standardised in the form of a dictionary, even if it is an actual physical book – which may be sometimes used as a projectile against the image of Goldstein – Newspeak is all about orality and speech.

In the history of philosophy, little attention has been paid to the actual medium carrying the language. With a few exceptions and these exceptions were, remarkably, against writing. A philosophical distrust of the written language pervades the history of philosophy. It all starts with Plato who accused the new medium of writing of making memory weaker and humans dependent on stored records. If writing is about storing information on paper, why would we need to memorise the same things in our minds? This distrust of the writing technology continued until the 20th century when we encounter it again in Wittgenstein – as J. C. Nyiri has shown. Nyiri points out a curious feature of Wittgenstein’s philosophy which has been ignored by many commentators: Wittgenstein valued speech more than written language, for speech was clearer – embedded in a form of life through gestures, tone of voice, actions – whereas writing was ambiguous at best. Writing, with its fake way of separating words on paper as if each word is separate and means something distinct, was to blame for the major philosophical problems which led Russell and Whitehead to despair, because writing gives this impression of crispness and clarity – writing requires analysis (be it grammatical or logical) as if life itself were logical or grammatical in any way. Language is just a fiction that we posit when we try to analyse the continuous flow of speech. We would have never noticed that there is such a thing as language had it not been for the invention of writing. Philosophically, writing is to be blamed for the unrealistic striving for clarity in analytic philosophy of language.

In the dispute between writing and speech, many philosophers have favoured speech – as being more authentic, more connected to a form of life. With one notable exception: Vilém Flusser, the Czech born philosopher who was very much influenced by Wittgenstein in his younger days. Flusser agreed that writing is a completely different thing than speech, but he also noticed that our dominant forms of life are quite immersed in writing. We cannot designate the speech-based forms of life as more “authentic” than the writerly forms of life since we are all literate beings and we live and breathe among written words. We learned to think while writing and our thinking bares the traces of this writerly way of being. The main feature of writing is its linearity (it always follows a direction, from left to right, from right to left, from top to bottom), so we came to think in a linear fashion: we analyse things in linear relations, as cause leading to effect, past to present, if this then that, our entire classical logic was born out of this linear striving for clarity. Also, for Flusser, writing created history with its record keeping devices which allowed to put events into order and say what happened before us. Before writing was invented, humans had no history, just

mythical stories of heroes and quests. Their collective past was hazy and hard to remember, much like Winston is struggling to remember something about Oceania's past in the absence of any written record.

Oceanians reverting to orality

We see the world of Oceania in 1984 through the eyes of Winston who is very much a literate creature of the old days. Winston finds it hard to believe that $2+2 = 5$ because he still clings to the rules of logic and mathematics, to the world of writing things down and looking for meanings in the symbols. It is much easier to believe the whisper “twoplustwoisfive” than to see the symbols written in front of you as “ $2+2 = 5$ ” and assent to them. The trouble with Winston is that he keeps imagining these symbols, those pesky little things which require proof according to some universal law. Winston knows to write and this doesn't help him in the oral-based world designed by the Party. The world of 1984 is dominated by the telescreens. Its official language, Newspeak, favours oral modes of communication which consist of repetitions and patterns of speech, emotions worn out on one's sleeve, memorisation and chanting. The Newspeak way of life rejects logical analysis, it requires only blind faith. At best, Newspeak sounds like the quacking of a duck. At its worst, it is a shout of hatred, an uncontrollable rage against the enemies of the Party. Newspeak defies logical analysis, its aim is to end thinking once and for all, and by this they mean linear thinking.

All forms of life have a history, a past to which one can relate. In order to impose only one form of life and erase all others, history must be stopped. The citizens of Oceania live in a kind of post-history because all their records are tampered with while the telescreens create a virtual present for them all the time. They do not need to stop and think, for the telescreens already tell them what to do and think. A post-historical world is immersed in streams of images and sounds. Nothing is linear there, hence logic can be surpassed. There are telescreens everywhere which keep on talking and flooding the atmosphere with music, news, whatever piece of information the Party wants you to know. The screens exist to interrupt thinking by asking for constant attention, to make any withdrawal into the self impossible, to abolish private thoughts. How can one recollect one's thoughts if the voice keeps on shouting and commending attention?

Writing has been, from the beginning, a way of taking distance from the flow of life. Writing was about arresting thoughts and speech on paper in order to look at them a second time, and think about them as if these were not your own. This was the beginning of what is usually called “objectivity” – to look at things as these were objects separate from oneself, which makes analysis possible. One cannot think while one is shouting, marching, singing, hating. But one can start thinking once the words are written and stand in front of the eyes ready to be scrutinised and analysed. Winston was writing private thoughts on a paper. As he is doing this, he is clarifying his own thoughts and producing, without his intention, a form of history. Winston is keeping records of what happened. If Winston were to write who is Oceania at war with today, or what is the ration of chocolate, and if tomorrow all facts were changed, all newspapers modified to accommodate the new truth, the information would remain as evidence in Winston’s notebook. As if Winston is producing a witness which cannot be bribed. Once he started writing, the past was no longer mutable for Winston, he trespassed one of the sacred principles of Ingsoc.

Is then Newspeak a feasible project? If everybody forgets their past and starts living according to one form of life, then yes. The screens are the most important devices for imposing this unique form of life. The screens do not need to be rewritten like the newspapers. They can say in the news bulletins one thing and next day they can contradict it, for there are no records. Screens are just a flow of information, rendered as speech and images, which crosses the weary minds of people every day. Even if people might remember from one day to another what had been said in the news, they have no proof. If only they could keep a record on paper, only then could they actually start making a history of the lies of the Party.

An apparatus to tame another apparatus

It seems that the only remedy against an artificial language such as Newspeak is another artificial device, writing itself. This technology which imposes a certain linear structure to thinking also immunises thinking against the chants and the repetitions, the blind belief in anything BB might say. In the philosophy of language, writing has led many philosophers into temptation, making them seek clarity of meaning where perhaps there is none, just a form of life. Following Wittgenstein, this is how people live and speak, what more is there to analyse? Yet writing is what anchors Winston in the flux of time, writing with its strange logical rules that makes propaganda hard to swallow. Writing keeps Winston sane and, in

the end, offers a way out of the madness of Newspeak. If many more people would jot down their thoughts and memories on paper, then the collective hallucination of a single possible form of life – the orthodox way of life – would fade away. In other words, spoken language is primordial for how we live but our forms of life do change under the pressure of media so, at some point, we cannot claim that one form of life is more 'natural' or authentic than another. We are writerly beings and this is why, as readers, we understand Winston's quest to find some piece of real history, to clarify the past. We take this form of being so granted, we see nothing wrong with it. But we would need to be in Winston's place, immersed in a world of audio-visual streams of information, in order to understand how strange our own way of life really is. Flusser brings an interesting response to Wittgenstein's concern with natural language: once we started writing, there is no going back to the oral mode of life, and then writing became nature, language needed to be imagined as a logically separable unit. And this response is illustrated in a nice way by the literary experiment which is 1984.

Orwell's 1984 sheds an interesting light on something that remained unsaid in Wittgenstein's later work: how mass-media shape our forms of life and can indirectly change language. In theory, following Wittgenstein's approach of language as use, the publication of a new dictionary for Newspeak should not be able to influence the way in which language is spoken because one book does not change forms of life in itself. However, if we take a closer look at how Oceania's population is exposed to media, we notice that they are interacting with information mostly through the telescreens, which leaves the population permanently exposed to an endless audio-visual flux of words and songs. The population of Oceania is reverting to the stage of orality because, in their case, the written word has no value insofar as it justifies nothing. In Oceania, the telescreens function as means of changing the forms of life of the population, because these screens are the main source of information and also because these cannot be shut down. In this chaos of audio-visual information which is constantly filling the attention span of people, only Winston manages to find a point of reference through his notebook. The notebook anchors Winston to his own past, to the events which he remembers, and to Oldspeak. As long as Winston has the notebook, his form of life cannot be changed without traces. He will write about it even if nobody reads his diary, he will write for himself.

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