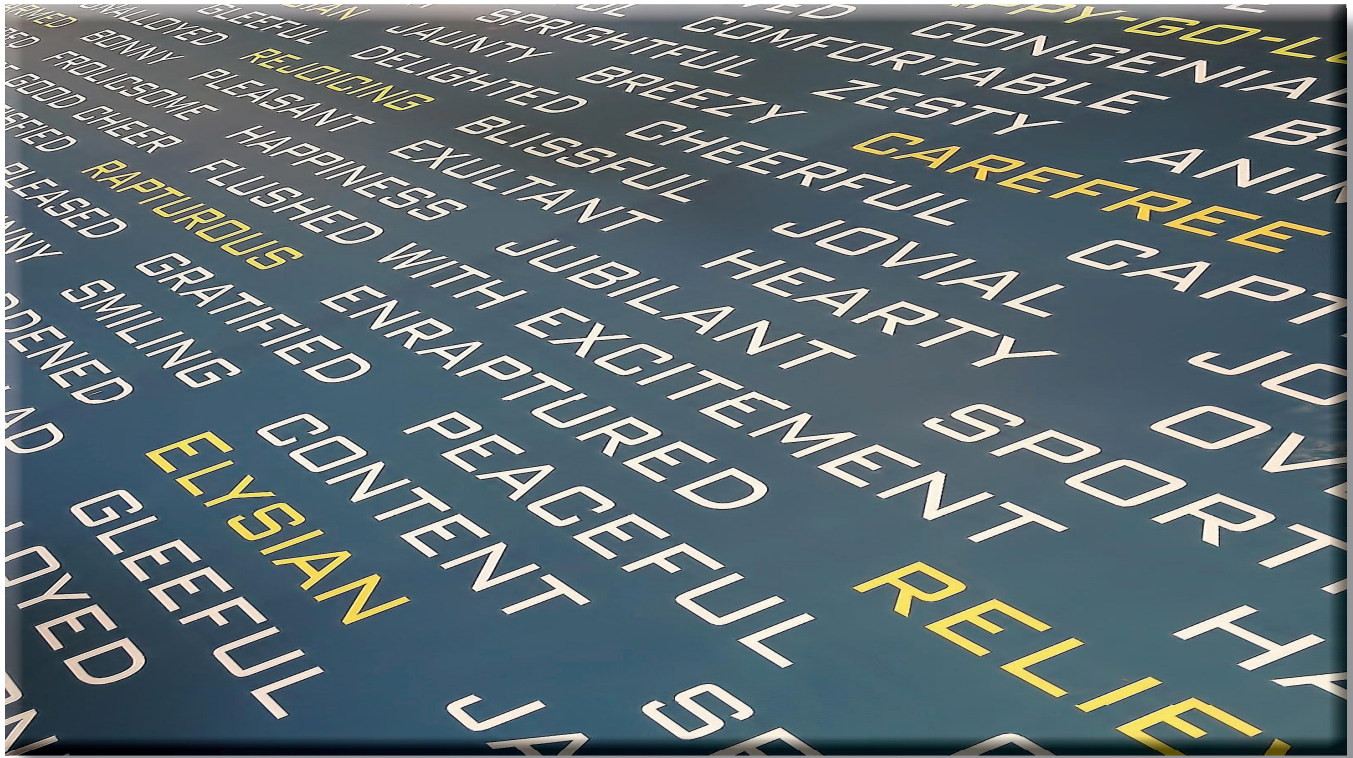


The Adulteration of Language

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Language shapes how we think about reality. The words available to us determine which thoughts we have. In politics, whoever controls the language controls the consciousness of the people, which is why every totalitarian movement in history began by redefining key words and phrases. Language is manipulated to make opponents unable to express their ideas clearly. Complex political concepts are reduced to meaningless slogans. Precise distinctions are blurred by vague generalizations. Gradually, people lose the ability to think clearly about political questions because they no longer have the linguistic tools necessary for clear thought.

This is not an accident. Consider how political language works in practice. When politicians want to justify violence, they do not call it *cruelty*. They call it *pacification* or *liberation* or *peacekeeping*. When politicians want to describe their enemies, they do not use neutral terms. They use words that carry emotional charges. *Rebels* become *terrorists*;

protesters become *mobs*; *critics* become *traitors*. Each word choice shapes how people feel about the underlying reality. Over time, the emotional associations become more powerful than the facts themselves.

George Orwell, the British novelist, recognized this process in his book, *1984*.¹ Using “newspeak” concepts, justice and truth were redefined to mean whatever the government wanted them to mean. Synonyms were consolidated so that there was only one way to express each concept. Emotional and intellectual distinctions were flattened so that complex thoughts became impossible. Eventually, the language became so impoverished that people could only think in the most basic terms. They lost the capacity for nuanced reasoning, critical analysis, and independent judgment.

This is why it’s vital to use precise language. Good prose requires clear thinking, and clear thinking is the foundation of human freedom. When

someone writes poorly, it is usually because they think poorly. When they think poorly, they make bad decisions. When they make bad decisions, they create bad outcomes for themselves and for others. The quality of language within a society determines the quality of thought, which determines the quality of life.

When communicating, it's best to use short words rather than long ones, and simple constructions rather than complex ones. Writers should avoid *cliches*, meaningless metaphors, and pretentious vocabulary. They should constantly ask themselves what they are trying to say and whether their words express it clearly. And they should never use language to conceal the truth from their

readers. Honesty in language leads to honesty in thought.

These principles apply to everyone, not just to writers. Every person who uses language has a responsibility to use it clearly and honestly. Every time someone repeats a meaningless phrase or accepts a false distinction, they contribute to the degradation of public discourse. Every time someone insists on precise definitions and accurate descriptions, they help preserve the conditions that make rational discussion possible. The battle for human decency is fought one sentence at a time. Each of us participates in this battle every time we open our mouths or pick up a pen.

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1. George Orwell, *1984* (New York, NY: Harcourt Collins Publishers, 2003), 85–370; George Orwell's *1984* was first published in 1949. Ω



“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.”
—George Orwell