

GRAMMATICAL SUBORDINATION

in Orwell's *Nineteen Eighty-Four*

JULIA MANOUKIAN

“If thought can corrupt language, then language can corrupt thought,” George Orwell famously remarks in “Politics and the English Language.” Orwell’s own attentiveness to language is evident not only in his stated insistence on its reciprocity with thought, but also in the inescapably circular form of its *antimetabolic* expression. Such control over language, Julia Manoukian argues, is integral to “political power, truthful communication, and psychological freedom.” The following essay examines how the Orwell of *Nineteen Eighty-Four* sometimes violates his own precepts, but that he does so to show as well as tell of the many ways language works to shape thought, even (or perhaps especially) at the grammatical level. Focusing on the novel’s “sparse use of the additive style” as well as “the passive voice” and “reduction of verbs” decried in Orwell’s earlier work, the essay that follows reveals much about how the uncritical use and reception of language can allow us to be “manipulated through the loss of human agency.” As the author so vividly reminds us, grammatical subordination is still subordination, and language can be insidious as well as empowering.

DR. LYN BENNETT

In his essay “Politics and the English Language,” George Orwell criticizes the euphemistic mode of political writing, claiming that people no longer see language as “a natural growth” or an instrument of control (1). Despite advising against the use of the passive voice in his essay, Orwell employs it selectively in *Nineteen Eighty-Four* to strip humans of their agency, transforming them into agents of governmental injustice. The Party’s anticipated release of the Newspeak dictionary’s tenth edition, which calls for a reduction in the number of verbs, further diminishes human agency by eliminating not only rebellious thoughts but thoughts of action altogether. When emotional language does surface in the additive style,⁹ Orwell is quick to restore linguistic distance, thereby reinforcing the Party’s control of thought through language. In *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, Orwell grammatically subordinates Oceania’s citizens to the Party with his use of the passive voice, his reduction in the number of verbs, and his sparse use of the additive style to illustrate language as an instrument of psychological control. Readers consequently realize that if they fail to control their own language use, someone else will control it for them.

⁹ In the additive style, clauses or phrases in a sentence are listed side by side, and no explicit connection is stated.

GRAMMATICAL SUBORDINATION

Although this control of language may seem to concern only a small group of literature students, it should in fact concern anyone who cares about political power, truthful communication, and psychological freedom.

In *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, Orwell employs the passive voice to grammatically strip humans of their agency, enabling the Party to use them as agents of injustice. The passive voice is common in scientific writing: the researcher is always the implied agent, but to say so would be inappropriate according to research conventions. Orwell intentionally breaks his fourth rule for writing – “Never use the passive where you can use the active” (“Politics” 9) – in order to evoke a tone of scientific sterility and mechanical distance. In contrast, the active voice would create a more direct and realistic tone, grammatically empowering the citizens as doers of action. During the preparations for Hate Week, despite the city coming alive with the heat of summer, Orwell switches to the passive:¹⁰

As though to harmonise with the general mood, the rocket bombs had been killing larger numbers of people than usual . . . Another bomb fell on a piece of waste ground which *was used* as a playground, and several dozen children *were blown* to pieces. There were further angry demonstrations,

¹⁰ Instances of the passive voice are italicized.

JULIA MANOUKIAN

Goldstein *was burned* in effigy, hundreds of copies of the poster of the Eurasian soldier *were torn down and added* to the flames, and a number of shops *were looted* in the turmoil; then a rumour flew round that spies were directing the rocket bombs by means of wireless waves, and an old couple who *were suspected* of being foreign extraction *had their house set on fire* and perished of suffocation. (*Nineteen Eighty-Four* 156, emphases added)

Evidently, readers don't know who or what burned Goldstein; they just know he "was burned." They know that posters of the Eurasian soldier were mysteriously "torn down and added to the flames," but not by whom. And, somehow, "a number of shops were looted" during this chaotic Hate Week preparation. Human agency is removed. Rather than explicitly stating that "the proles *burned* Goldstein in effigy, *tore down* nine hundred copies of the Eurasian soldier's poster and *added* them to the flames, and *looted* fifty shops in the turmoil," Orwell grammatically ensures that the proles have no power, even though it is their mob that is physically destructive. The party then becomes the implied agent, adopting the role of the omniscient researcher, controlling the proles like puppets. Yet it should be noted that, grammatically, the bombs themselves are means of population control and

GRAMMATICAL SUBORDINATION

not the people who launch them; readers cannot even discern how many people the bombs killed (just “a larger number than usual”), or how many children were blown to pieces (“several dozen”). The lack of specificity illustrates how the Party manipulates language to evade the facts. But, most importantly, the passive voice allows the Party to assume agency over the proles. Orwell hopes that readers will recognize how unclear language enables those who use it to manipulate human subjects by depriving them of agency.

While it is true that the proles are equated with animals by the Party - “proles and animals are free” (*Nineteen Eighty-Four* 72) - it does not necessarily follow that they have no will; in fact, because the proles comprise eighty-five percent of Oceania’s population, their agency is most important. “*If there is hope, wrote Winston, it lies in the proles*” (72). Conversely, if there is no hope, it is because the swarming, disregarded masses, the social underlings who are supposedly “free,” have been grammatically subdued by the Party. Orwell reminds readers that no one is immune to distorted language.

Human agency is further diminished in Oceania with the anticipated release of the tenth edition of the Newspeak dictionary. The official Party language,

JULIA MANOUKIAN

Newspeak, is not only designed to reduce the use of verbs, but to reduce, if not remove, thoughts of action altogether. When O'Brien tells Winston about the tenth edition, he highlights a key point in Newspeak philosophy: "Some of the new developments are most ingenious. The reduction in the number of verbs - that is the point that will appeal to you, I think" (165). Rather than pairing the simple past form of reduce, "reduced," with a proper noun like "the Party" or even a collective pronoun, "they," as the doer of action, O'Brien uses "the reduction." By turning actions into things, called "nominalization," the Party takes one more step toward eliminating human agency and the will to act. For this reason, nominalization threatens the very building blocks of action. In "Politics and the English Language," Orwell posits, "If thought corrupts language, language can also corrupt thought" (7). As if simply stating the fact is not enough, Orwell substantiates his argument with the insistence of its antimetabolic¹¹ form. The same holds true for what O'Brien says about the tenth edition of the Newspeak dictionary. Whether he realizes it or not, O'Brien substantiates what he sees as "most ingenious" developments by avoiding powerful verbs like "reduce." In

¹¹ Antimetabole is defined as "Repetition of words, in successive clauses, in reverse grammatical order" (Burton).

GRAMMATICAL SUBORDINATION

other words, what he is saying matches how he says it. The eleventh and twelfth Newspeak dictionaries would presumably contain even fewer verbs, less action, and less thought, thereby promoting more conformity, more orthodoxy, and more homogeneity. Without the ability to conceptualize action, citizens have no will to act. Thus the Inner Party members' internalized notions of vague language, paired with the shrinking number of official verbs in Oceania, reinforces the conclusion that the Party uses language as an instrument of psychological control, even if that control includes self-regulation.

The sparse use of the additive style not only confirms language as an instrument of control but also of dehumanization: emotion is denied through sentence structure. In "How to Write a Sentence," Stanley Fish posits that the additive style, otherwise known as parataxis, gives "the effect not of planning, order, and control, but of spontaneity, haphazardness, and chance" (61). In other words, Fish believes the additive style embodies the nature of human experience more than the rationality of the subordinating style. One of the only instances in *Nineteen Eighty-Four* where the quality of human experience surfaces, the moment after Winston's electric shock therapy, lasts a mere thirty seconds:

JULIA MANOUKIAN

But there had been a moment - he did not know how long, thirty seconds, perhaps, - of luminous certainty, when each new suggestion of O'Brien's had filled up a patch of emptiness *and* become absolute truth, *and* when two and two could have been three as easily as five, if that were what was needed. It had faded but before O'Brien had dropped his hand; *but* though he could not recapture it, he could remember it, as one remembers a vivid experience at some period of one's life when one was in effect a different person. (271, emphases added)

In the additive style, as indicated above, the italicized words carry the experience forward with a compelling realism. Orwell captures the electrifying humanity behind Winston's physical and psychological torture. In thirty seconds, Orwell freezes this frame of luminous certainty by dangling the absolute truth of human experience in front of readers, before snatching it away and restoring rhetorical control with the subordinating style. The word "as" signals an ordering of components in terms of temporality; the "vivid experience" is set prior to the current one. It is almost like reality flashes before Winston's eyes before he finally loses, linguistically and physically, his final sliver of humanity. In this sense, Winston experiences what can be called a reverse anagnorisis, wherein he recognizes that the only way to survive is to sacrifice his humanity. The

GRAMMATICAL SUBORDINATION

anagnorisis is said to be reversed because, instead of producing knowledge, Winston's realization produces ignorance - a learned ignorance. By giving himself up to the Party at the end and admitting that "he love[s] Big Brother," Winston becomes the perfect example not only of how thought and language are inseparable, but of how language enables thought and human emotion (311).

In *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, George Orwell grammatically subordinates humans to the Party by employing the passive voice, the reduction of verbs, and the sparse use of the additive style, transforming humans into agents of governmental injustice that ultimately reinforce the Party's absolute psychological power. During the preparations for Hate Week, the passive voice grammatically allows the Party to assume agency over the proles, thereby using them to carry out population control. This lack of individual agency is maintained with the release of the Newspeak dictionary's tenth edition, which limits citizens' actions by further reducing the number of verbs, the building blocks of action. Lastly, the final moments of Winston's humanity, written in the additive style, confirm the Party's ability to stifle human emotion and defile individual will. By removing expressions of human will, the ability to act, and the ability to feel, the Party effectively perverts

JULIA MANOUKIAN

language for its own ends. In this sense, Orwell's thesis in "Politics and the English Language" is embodied in *Nineteen Eighty-Four*: when we lose language, we lose the ability to act, to think, and to *be* ourselves.

GRAMMATICAL SUBORDINATION

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