

Simpler Terms; If It's 'Orwellian,' It's Probably Not

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ON George Orwell's centenary -- he was born on June 25, 1903 -- the most telling sign of his influence is the words he left us with: not just "thought police," "doublethink" and "unperson," but also "Orwellian" itself, 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 rival political reproach "Machiavellian," which had a 500-year head start.

Eponyms are always the narrowest sort of tribute, though. "Orwellian" doesn't have anything to do with Orwell as a socialist thinker, or for that matter, as a human being. People are always talking about Orwell's decency, but "Orwellian decency" would be an odd phrase indeed. And the adjective commemorates Orwell the writer only for three of his best known works: the novels "Animal Farm" and "1984" and the essay "Politics and the English Language."

"Orwellian" reduces Orwell's palette to a single shade of noir. It brings to mind only sordid regimes of surveillance and thought control and the distortions of language that make them possible.

Orwell's views on language may outlive his political ideas. At least they seem to require no updating or apology, whereas his partisans feel the need to justify the continuing relevance of his politics. He wasn't the first writer to condemn political euphemisms. Edmund Burke was making the same points 150 years earlier about the language used by apologists for the French Revolution: "Things are never called by their common names. Massacre is sometimes agitation, sometimes effervescence, sometimes excess."

But Orwell is the writer most responsible for diffusing the modern view of political language as an active accomplice of tyranny. As he wrote in "Politics and the English Language," "Political language . . . is designed to make lies sound truthful and murder respectable, and to give an appearance of solidity to pure wind."

That was an appealing notion to an age that had learned to be suspicious of ideologies, and critics on all sides have found it useful to cite "Politics and the English Language" in condemning the equivocations of their opponents.

Critics on the left hear Orwellian resonances in phrase like "weapons of mass protection," for nonlethal arms, or in names like the Patriot Act or the Homeland Security Department's Operation Liberty Shield, which authorizes indefinite detention of asylum-seekers from certain nations. Critics on the right hear them in phrases like "reproductive health services," "Office of Equality Assurance" and "English Plus," for bilingual education.

And just about everyone discerned an Orwellian note in the name of the Pentagon's Total Information Awareness project, which was aimed at mining a vast centralized database of personal information for patterns that might reveal terrorist activities. (The name was changed last month to the Terrorist Information Awareness program, in an effort to reassure Americans who have nothing to hide.)

Which of those terms are deceptive packaging and which are merely effective branding is a matter of debate. But there's something troubling in the easy use of the label "Orwellian," as if these phrases committed the same sorts of linguistic abuses that led to the gulags and the death camps.

The specters that "Orwellian" conjures aren't really the ones we have to worry about. Newspeak may have been a plausible invention in 1948, when totalitarian thought control still seemed an imminent possibility. But the collapse of Communism revealed the bankruptcy not just of the Stalinist social experiment, but of its 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.

Political language is still something to be wary of, but it doesn't work as Orwell feared. In fact the modern language of control is more effective than Soviet Newspeak precisely because it's less bleak and intimidating.

Think of the way business has been re-engineering the language of ordinary interaction in the interest of creating "high-performance corporate cultures." To a reanimated Winston Smith, there would be something wholly familiar in being told that he had to file an annual vision statement or that he should henceforth eliminate "problems" from his vocabulary in favor of "issues."

But the hero of "1984" would find the whole exercise much more convivial than the Two Minute Hate at the Ministry of Truth. And he'd be astonished that management allowed employees to post "Dilbert" strips on the walls of their cubicles.

For Orwell, the success of political jargon and euphemism required an uncritical or even unthinking audience: a "reduced state of consciousness," as he put it, was "favorable to political conformity." As things turned out, though, the political manipulation of language seems to thrive on the critical skepticism that Orwell encouraged.

In fact, there has never been an age that was so well-schooled in the perils of deceptive language or in decoding political and commercial messages, as seen in the official canonization of Orwell himself. Thanks to the schools, "1984" is probably the best-selling political novel of modern times (current Amazon sales rank: No. 93), and "Politics and the English Language" is the most widely read essay about the English language and very likely in it as well.

But as advertisers have known for a long time, no audience is easier to beguile than one that is smugly confident of its own sophistication. The word "Orwellian" contributes to that impression. Like "propaganda," it implies an aesthetic judgment more than a moral one. Calling an expression Orwellian means not that it's deceptive but that it's crudely deceptive.

Today, the real damage isn't done by the euphemisms and circumlocutions that we're likely to describe as Orwellian. "Ethnic cleansing," "revenue enhancement," "voluntary regulation," "tree-density reduction," "faith-based initiatives," "extra affirmative action," "single-payer plans" -- these terms may be oblique, but at least they wear their obliquity on their sleeves.

Rather, the words that do the most political work are simple ones -- "jobs and growth," "family values" and "color-blind" not to mention "life" and "choice." But concrete words like these are the hardest ones to see through. They're opaque when you hold them up to the light.

Orwell knew that, of course. "To see what is in front of one's nose needs a constant struggle" -- not what you'd call an Orwellian sentiment, but very like the man.

Photo: George Orwell, with his son in postwar London, was not Orwellian.