

Evaluation of "politics and the english language" essay sample

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George Orwell’s article, “ Politics and the English Language,” explores the increasing misuse of the English language and its possible political causes. When I first saw the title “ Politics,” I was afraid to read the article. The first word of the title is such a sensitive one in my mind, since it always seems to involve argument. I also fear my knowledge about the subject is too limited, even when I translate the word into Chinese. Despite my initial discomfort, I have tried my best to use proper English and not, as Orwell terms them, “ meaningless words” (p. 108) to analyze the reading and more specifically George Orwell’s argument that our bad application of the English language can be reversed. I agree partially with George Orwell in that people often make mistakes in using English, however I also think he is too harsh in his criticism and lets his personal political inclination pervades his objectivity. In “ Politics and the English Language,” George Orwell describes several bad language habits existent in the English-speaking world today. These habits include dying metaphors, operators, pretentious diction, and meaningless words, and he mentions that those “ bad habits” appear in prose construction. He states that the worst part of modern writing is making the results presentable by “ gumming together long strips of words”(p. 111), which have already been set in order. It is a pretentious, “ Latinized” (p. 108) style. He believes that such habits have a negative affect on our society’s progress. Meaning in language, he says, is often deliberately manipulated. For instance, slack or hack writers, instead of doing their real job of clarifying

meaning, open channels through which " the ready made phrases come crowding in"(WSU).

" They will construct your sentences for you—even think your thoughts for you, to a certain extent—and at need they will perform the important service of partially concealing your meaning even from yourself" (WSU). George Orwell is so against staleness of imagery and verbal imprecision because they lead to vagueness, so that true meaning in language is lost.

Additionally, there is a strong connection between corrupted language and political manipulation, for people can be persuaded of anything. These are some of the dangers that we should be aware of in the English language today. In addition to presenting the mistakes of English-speakers, Orwell also reflects on how to improve them. He believes that there are certain ways to better the bad habits of English-speakers. With specific attention to how the minority population thinks and writes, Orwell even outlines how to change the main rules and styles of English. In the end of the article, George Orwell lists rules that cover most causes, and I think they are useful especially for someone who is in the earliest stage of writing:

- i. Never use a metaphor, simile, or other figure of speech, which you are used to seeing in print.
- ii. Never use a long word where a short one will do.
- iii. If it is possible to cut a word out, always cut it out.
- iv. Never use the passive where you can use the active.
- v. Never use a foreign phrase, a scientific word, or a jargon word if you can think of an everyday English equivalent.
- vi. Break any of these rules sooner than say anything outright barbarous. (p. 119)

According to George Orwell, if English speakers follow these simple rules and become more conscious of their mistakes, they can improve their hold on the English language and remove bad habits. George Orwell also recommends that we think carefully and ask ourselves certain questions before writing. I learned that if you wish to be a scrupulous writer, you should ask yourself the four questions plus two extra questions before starting to write. "What am I trying to say?" Think about what are the main ideas or aspects before writing; don't write an essay without your thoughts. "What words will express it?" This indicates the necessity of using proper words to describe what we want to express. "What image or idiom will make it clearer?" "Is this image fresh enough to have an effect?" It is necessary to make sure that the way you express your mental image is clear to readers. One of the additional questions is "Could I put it more shortly?" I do believe this is a pretty important question before beginning an essay, because it can help avoid repetitiveness and make the essential parts of a piece of writing come through. The last question, "Have I said anything avoidably ugly," is important because it makes a work more readable and sophisticated. Therefore, we should start considering not using language distractedly; also we should formulate our ideas before beginning to write an essay. I absolutely support George Orwell's idea that the greatest enemy is insincerity, which clouds meaning. As the writer states, the euphemism is a political device due to the fact that some facts are too brutal for most people to face directly; thus political speech and writing are largely indefensible and cloudy vagueness. Orwell argues against phraseology that functions to name sensitive things such as war, crime, and poverty without causing the listener

to have mental pictures of them, instead softening their meaning. He euphemistically uses 56-word sentences instead of the originally 16-word sentences, making it more difficult for readers.

A sentence containing 56 words is like a punishment for readers, because they have to search harder for meaning in a sea of twisted facts. Hence, between telling the truth in brutal but honest terms and using euphemism, politicians choose the latter, turning facts to be partially false. Political and economic pressures produce an ugly English language, full of bad habits and dishonesty, which then produces foolish thinking in English-speaking minds. Foolish thinking produces uglier language, continuing the cycle. The politicians, however, prefer to use euphemism and vagueness, because they require us to think less and continue their misuse of language. Reading through " Politics and the English Language," while I understand George Orwell's ideas, there are still flawed areas of his argument and parts that he does not present well. When I read the first paragraph of the article, I was confused about how, according to Orwell, politics and economics ultimately cause a decline in a language. I could not see how the areas of politics and economics connected to language. I read the article with this question in mind, and I understood that political language causes vagueness and partial misunderstanding in English-speakers, and can often lead us to deviate from the true meanings of ideas. Still, he does not explain how economics can also cause a decline in the language.

Another weak point of the essay is when Orwell writes at the beginning, " a man may take to drink because he feels himself to be a failure, and then fail

all the more completely because he drinks" (p. 102). He uses this description of a cycle to show how mistakes in the English language lead to foolish thinking in its speakers, which leads to more mistakes and inaccuracies in English. This part confused me at first, though, because it seems to come out of nowhere and I had to figure out how this example related to his overall argument. In my opinion, George Orwell does not explain well on these points. In addition, personally I believe that George Orwell too harshly criticizes some meaningless words used in novels or prose. Because of this, I want to use the word autocratic to describe him. I don't agree with him for several reasons. First, not all the readers are as academic as he is. I do believe more than half of the readers read novels, fictions or prose for relaxation or fun. If the authors continually use sophisticated words or misused words, I don't believe that all of the readers will get the points, and at the same time, it will take away from the purpose of reading. It is as if the author is playing around with the readers by using improper words. Also, George Orwell used the words " swindles"(p. 110) and " perversion" (p. 110) to declare his perspective on his example of Ecclesiastes. Also the author mentions art criticisms and literary criticisms are really common works that contain meaningless words. But I don't think the words that the author lists such as " romantic (p. 109)" and " sentimental (p. 109)" are meaningless, particularly when used in art critiques. So I felt that he uses such derogatory words. Relating to the earlier points that Orwell mentions, those two words obviously have variable meanings, which conflict with his criticisms of using words of variable meanings.

I did some research on the " Politics and the English Language," and I found an idea that is especially unique and points out the author's statement. " Orwell explores the function of language in this essay; he analyzes how the corruption of language gives rise to massive political conformity, a consequence that makes the propagandists shiver all over in victory thrills. With Hitler and Stalin's recent political purging of literature, the threats were real enough. The power of political propaganda was in the air. Bad writing was in the air. Muddy thinking was in the air"(WCU website). I became interested at this point and continued search about his backgrounds, even the political views. When I read his political views online it surprised me that he has such a strong political background, and when I recall some words he uses in the article, like " fascism"(p. 109) which is used several times, and " totalitarian"(p. 110), I think they give readers a clue about George Orwell's political aspect. Hence, I searched him in Wikipedia and I got to know that " Orwell stated in " Why I Write" (1946): " Every line of serious work that I have written since 1936 has been written, directly or indirectly, against totalitarianism and for democratic socialism, as I understand it." (3. 3 Wikipedia) Based on this significant information, I believe that he put his personal political tendency in this essay. This explains why he so harshly criticizes language use by politicians. " Although he was never a Trotskyist, he was strongly influenced by the Trotskyist and anarchist critiques of the Soviet regime, and by the anarchists' emphasis on individual freedom"(Wikipedia 3. 3).

He is a socialist, who advocates everyone deserves equal opportunity, especially the working class. This is why he was not satisfied with the

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economic policy of his day, and he uses his harsh writing to criticize the bureaucracy of regime. We can see how George Orwell strictly pursues political issues in his essays. " George Orwell does not specifically discuss propaganda. He makes the case that political writing, including speech writing, is " bad" because, like propaganda, it treats language as practically meaningless"(WCU website). Although he wrote " Politics and the English Language" decades ago, we can still share his disgust with widespread English-speaking mistakes and can still find many examples to prove that bad writing is caused by the public's blind following of others. Because we live in a world that is filled with politics, euphemism plays an important role in our understanding of language. Therefore, we should be able to identify our bad habits as well as political language and expose them on both sides. Overall, I mainly agree with George Orwell's argument that " Modern English is full of bad habits"(p. 102) and those " bad habits" can be avoided by certain simple rules, but we disagree over his harsh criticisms of " meaningless words"(108) and his personal political views which mix into his essay and pervade his fairness.