

George Orwell, *Nineteen Eighty-Four*

LITERARY BITS

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

GEORGE ORWELL

George Orwell is the pseudonym of Eric Arthur Blair, born in India in 1903, but educated in England at Eton, where he began to develop socialist ideas.

After school, he went back to India and worked for the Imperial Police from 1922 to 1927. Back in London, he started a social experiment to learn about the real conditions of poor people.

After a period in Paris, he decided to start publishing under the name of George, a common English name, Orwell, a river he liked. In 1936 he went to Catalonia with his wife to report on the Spanish Civil War. In 1938 he was diagnosed tuberculosis and suffered from this disease for the rest of his life.

His most famous works are “Animal Farm” (1945) and “Nineteen Eighty-four” (1949).

He died in a London hospital in 1950.



G. Orwell

ABOUT THE NOVEL

NINETEEN EIGHTY-FOUR

This anti-utopian novel describes a 1984 future world divided into three blocks. England is part of the Empire called Oceania, ruled by the Party whose leader is Big Brother.

In order to control the people, the Party has imposed an invented language called Newspeak with a limited number of words and a series of prohibitions to suppress individualism.



From the 1956 film version

The protagonist, Winston Smith, secretly writes his thoughts and memories for future generations, and meets a group of rebels.

At the end of the story Winston is tortured in Room 101. When released, he no longer has an identity.

THE TEXT

NEWSPEAK

Winston joins a colleague, Syme, for lunch in the Ministry of Truth. Syme is a philologist who is completing the Eleventh Edition of the Newspeak Dictionary.

1. 'How is the Dictionary getting on?' said Winston, raising his voice to **overcome** the noise. 'Slowly', said Syme. 'I'm on the adjectives. It's fascinating.'
He had brightened up immediately at the mention of Newspeak. He pushed his **pannikin** aside, took up his **hunk** of bread in one delicate hand and his cheese in the other, and **leaned** across the table so as to be able to speak without shouting.
'The Eleventh Edition is the definite edition', he said. 'We're getting the language into its final shape – the shape it's going to have when nobody speaks anything else. When we've finished with it, people like you will have to learn it all over again. You think, I dare say, that our chief job is inventing new words. But not a bit of it! We're destroying words – **scores** of them, hundreds of them, every day. We're cutting the language down to the bone. The Eleventh Edition won't contain a single word that will become obsolete before the year 2050.'
2. 'It's a beautiful thing, the destruction of words. Of course the great **wastage** is in the verbs and adjectives, but there are hundreds of nouns that can be got rid of as well. It isn't only the synonyms; there are the antonyms. After all, what justification is there for a word which is simply the opposite of some other word? A word contains its opposite in itself. Take "good" for instance. If you have a word like "good", what need is there for a word like "bad"? "Ungood" will do just as well – better, because it's an exact opposite, which the other is not. Or again, if you want a stronger version of "good", what sense is there in having a whole string of vague useless words like "excellent" and "splendid" and all the rest of them? "Plusgood" covers the meaning, or "doubleplusgood" if you want something stronger still. Of course we use those forms already but in the final version of Newspeak there'll be nothing else. In the end the whole notion of goodness and badness will be covered by only six words – in reality, only one word. Don't you see the beauty of that, Winston? It was B.B.'s idea originally, of course, he added as an **afterthought**. A sort of **vapid eagerness** flitted across Winston's face at the mention of Big Brother.

Nevertheless, Syme immediately detected a certain lack of enthusiasm.

'You haven't a real appreciation of Newspeak, Winston', he said almost sadly. 'Even when you write it you're still thinking in Oldspeak. I've read some of those pieces that you write in The Times occasionally. They're good enough, but they're translations. In your heart you'd prefer to stick to Oldspeak, with all its vagueness and its useless shades of meaning. You don't **grasp** the beauty of the destruction of words. Do you know that Newspeak is the only language in the world whose vocabulary gets smaller every year?' Winston did know that, of course. He smiled, sympathetically he hoped, not trusting himself to speak. Syme bit off another fragment of the dark-coloured bread, chewed it briefly, and went on:

'Don't you see that the whole aim of Newspeak is to narrow the range of thought? In the end we shall make thoughtcrime literally impossible, because there will be no words in which to express it. Every concept that can ever be needed, will be expressed by exactly one word, with its meaning rigidly defined and all its subsidiary meanings rubbed out and forgotten. Already, in the Eleventh Edition, we're not far from that point. But the process will still be continuing long after you and I are dead. Every year fewer and fewer words, and the range of consciousness always a little smaller.

3. 'By 2050 earlier, probably – all real knowledge of Oldspeak will have disappeared. The whole literature of the past will have been destroyed. Chaucer, Shakespeare, Milton, Byron – they'll exist only in Newspeak versions, not merely changed into something different, but actually changed into something contradictory of what they used to be. Even the literature of the Party will change. Even the slogans will change. How could you have a slogan like "freedom is slavery" when the concept of freedom has been abolished? The whole climate of thought will be different. In fact, there will be no thought, as we understand it now.

afterthought: *ripensamento*
eagerness: *entusiasmo*
to flit across: *attraversare*
to grasp: *afferrare*
hunk: *tozzo*
to lean: *piegarsi*

nevertheless: *tuttavia*
to overcome: *sopraffare*
pannikin: *tegamino*
score: *gruppi di venti*
vapid: *tiepido*
wastage: *spreco*

COMPREHENSION

1 Read the first extract and answer the questions.

1. Where are Winston and Syme?
2. What are they doing?
3. What are the characteristics of the Eleventh Edition of the Newspeak Dictionary?
4. What is the real purpose of the dictionary?

2 Read the second extract and decide if the following statements are true or false.

1. Verbs and adjectives are the easiest words to get rid of.
2. The dictionary will keep synonyms, but will eliminate antonyms.
3. The opposite of 'good' will become 'ungood'.
4. The comparative of 'good' will be 'plusgood'.
5. The idea of eliminating words was Big Brother's.
6. Newspeak reduces the number of words every year.
7. The purpose of Newspeak is to reduce crime.

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3 Read the third extract. What will happen to the works of great writers? Why will the slogan 'freedom in slavery' become useless?

ANALYSIS

4 Answer the questions.

1. How does Winston's attitude change from section 1 to section 2?
2. What is strange about Syme's new dictionary edition?
3. What language is Oldspeak?
4. What will happen to words with just one meaning?
5. What will happen to literature?
6. What is a thoughtcrime?

DISCUSSION

5 Discuss.

1. Think of the characteristics of Newspeak. Could it be a 5th generation programming language?
2. Explain the meaning of translation in the text and then compare a translation between two natural languages to program translation, i.e. the role of assemblers, interpreters and compilers.
3. Do you think that one day an artificial language such as a programming language could become a sort of jargon used among computer programmers to communicate with each other?