

## Orwell as linguist

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You have asked a linguist to deliver the Orwell lecture, so you will not be surprised to learn that I have been exploring what Orwell's views were about language. It's often thought that he had a great deal to say about the topic. Ask people who have heard something of Orwell and they will say 'Of course he did', and cite two items as evidence: Newspeak, from *Nineteen Eighty-four*, and his essay 'Politics and the English language'. But there is far more to Orwell's interest in language than this.

Let me start with the essay. 'Politics and the English Language' - one of the most important articles on the language to have come out of the 20th century. I acknowledged this myself way back in 1969, when I included it in an anthology of influential essays on English.<sup>1</sup> Published in 1946, it is a short essay - just over 5000 words - but it had an immediate impact because it drew attention to an issue that had simply not been addressed. Today, the point has been made repeatedly, and we have learned to be sceptical of political language that obscures or deliberately hides realities; but at the time nobody had read anything quite like this:

In our time, political speech and writing are largely the defence of the indefensible. Things like the continuance of British rule in India, the Russian purges and deportations, the dropping of atom bombs on Japan, can indeed be defended, but only by arguments which are too brutal for most people to face, and which do not square with the aims of political parties. Thus political language has to consist largely of euphemism, question-begging and sheer cloudy vagueness.

And he gives some powerful examples:

Defenceless villages are bombarded from the air, the inhabitants driven out into the countryside, the cattle machine-gunned, the huts set on fire with incendiary bullets: this is called *pacification*. Millions of peasants are robbed of their farms and sent trudging along the roads with no more than they can carry: this is called *transfer of population* or *rectification of frontiers*. People are imprisoned for years without trial, or shot in the back of the neck or sent to die of scurvy in Arctic lumber camps: this is called *elimination of unreliable elements*.

He comments:

Such phraseology is needed if one wants to name things without calling up mental pictures of them.

And he concocts an example, imagining the way an English professor might defend Russian totalitarianism (remember, this is 1946, with Stalin in charge). He cannot say outright:

I believe in killing off your opponents when you can get good results by doing so.

Rather, it will be something like this:

While freely conceding that the Soviet regime exhibits certain features which the humanitarian may be inclined to deplore, we must, I think, agree that a certain curtailment of the right to political opposition is an unavoidable concomitant of transitional periods, and that the rigours which the Russian people have been called upon to undergo have been amply justified in the sphere of concrete achievement.

Or, to remind you:

I believe in killing off your opponents when you can get good results by doing so.

'The inflated style', he comments in a lovely metaphor, 'is itself a kind of euphemism. A mass of Latin words falls upon the facts like soft snow, blurring the outlines and covering up the details.' [5 mins]

In his creative writing, Orwell frequently alludes to the way words hide realities, or are not up to the task of describing realities, even in the most mundane of circumstances. Take this reflection on the notes he made when visiting some of the poor housing of Lancashire in *The Road to Wigan Pier* (52):

To me as I read them they bring back what I have seen, but they cannot in themselves give much idea of what conditions are like in those fearful northern slums. Words are such feeble things. What is the use of a brief phrase like 'roof leaks' or 'four beds for eight people'? It is the kind of thing your eye slides over, registering nothing. And yet what a wealth of misery it can uncover!

And he goes on to describe the overcrowding, the damp, the bugs, the lack of ventilation, and the absence of lavatories.

I think we all have come to recognize and regret the phenomenon Orwell is identifying in his attack on the evasive language of politics. His legacy is that people are now prepared to criticize public figures who use euphemistic jargon, who fail to 'tell it as it is'. We notice when the telling is obscured by cliché. We can be fairly certain that any politician who says 'let me be perfectly clear about this' is about to launch into some Orwellian political speak. And there are now words in the language to help us describe what is going on. *Gobbledegook* was first recorded in 1944, a couple of years before Orwell wrote his essay. *Double-talk* is from the same decade. And my term *political speak* itself derives from Orwell, who was the first to use *-speak* as a suffix (in *Nineteen Eighty-four*, with *Oldspeak* and *Newspeak*).<sup>2</sup>

Now, if Orwell had left it like that in his essay, and made his point solely with reference to what he saw as the insincere language of politics, I would have little to argue about. The unfortunate thing is that he does not stop there. He generalizes wildly to the language as a whole, in such a way that, if we were to follow his directives, we would end up being unable to say anything at all.

The generalization is there at the outset. This is how he begins:

Most people who bother with the matter at all would admit that the English language is in a bad way...

Well, not me, for a start. And not Orwell either, for how could the language be in such a bad state if it can produce the brilliance of *Nineteen Eighty-four* or *Animal Farm*, let alone the vivid descriptions of characters and settings that we are given in all of his novels and in his documentary non-fiction. Two examples. Here's George Bowling's self-description, at the very beginning of *Coming Up for Air*. He has got some new false teeth, and is trying to shave with a blunt razor blade while running his bath. He looks in the mirror:

I haven't such a bad face, really. It's one of those bricky-red faces that go with butter-coloured hair and pale-blue eyes. I've never gone grey or bald, thank God, and when I've got my teeth in I probably don't look my age, which is forty-five.

He gets into the bath:

I soaped my arms (I've got those kind of pudgy arms that are freckled up to the elbow) and then took the back-brush and soaped my shoulder-blades, which in the ordinary way I can't reach. It's a nuisance, but there are several parts of my body that I can't reach nowadays. The truth is that I'm inclined to be a little bit on the fat side. I don't mean that I'm like something in a sideshow at a fair. My weight isn't much over fourteen stone, and last time I measured round my waist it was either forty-eight or forty-nine, I forget which. And I'm not what they call 'disgustingly' fat, I haven't got one of those bellies that sag half-way down to the knees. It's merely that I'm a little bit broad in the beam, with a tendency to be barrel-shaped. Do you know the active, hearty kind of fat man, the athletic bouncing type that's nicknamed Fatty or Tubby and is always the life and soul of the party? I'm that type. 'Fatty', they mostly call me. Fatty Bowling. George Bowling is my real name.

This is almost Dickensian in its detail; I can see George Bowling now. I think we all can. (And by the way, that passage gives the lie to anyone who claims that George Orwell had no sense of humour. This is great comic writing.)

And here's a piece of vivid natural description, as John Flory the timber-merchant goes out for a jungle walk in *Burmese Days* (46):

It was scrub jungle at first, with dense stunted bushes, and the only trees were half-wild mangoes, bearing little turpentiney fruits the size of plums. Then the road struck among taller trees. The jungle was dried-up and lifeless at this time of year. The trees lined the road in close, dusty ranks, with leaves a dull olive-green. No birds were visible except some ragged brown creatures like disreputable thrushes, which hopped clumsily under the bushes; in the distance some other bird uttered a cry of 'Ah ha ha! Ah ha ha!' - a lonely, hollow sound like the echo of a laugh. There was a poisonous, ivy-like smell of crushed leaves. It was still hot, though the sun was losing his glare and the slanting light was yellow.

Note how all five sensory channels are invoked, in this description: we hear the birds, see the bushes, feel the heat, smell the leaves, taste the plums. And Orwell is a master of the apt image that makes the unfamiliar familiar and helps us recognize a setting or a type of person. My favourite in that passage is 'disreputable thrushes'.

So, come on, George, who are you kidding? The English language is in a bad shape? Just because you've found some examples of terrible writing here and there, this isn't enough to condemn the language as a whole. He really does believe that the entire language is in a mess. Here's another quote from the beginning of 'Politics and the English Language':

Modern English, especially written English, is full of bad habits which spread by imitation and which can be avoided if one is willing to take the necessary trouble. If one can get rid of these habits one can think more clearly...

So what are these bad habits? He summarizes them under two headings: 'staleness of imagery' and 'lack of precision', illustrates from some examples, and then, in the penultimate paragraph of his essay, gives his famous six rules:

1. Never use a metaphor, simile or other figure of speech which you are used to seeing in print.
2. Never use a long word where a short one will do.
3. If it is possible to cut a word out, always cut it out.
4. Never use the passive where you can use the active.
5. Never use a foreign phrase, a scientific word or a jargon word if you can think of an everyday English equivalent.

And then, the most important rule of all, which shows that Orwell is a class above the naive pedantry of traditional prescriptivism:

6. Break any of these rules sooner than say anything outright barbarous.

I think most people, upon hearing these rules, would say they are very sensible. And indeed, I don't know anyone who would disagree with the first rule: if an expression has become so commonplace that it has become a cliché, then it is indeed wise to avoid it. But rules 2 to 5 are hugely problematic. In fact they are unworkable, as Orwell himself recognizes:

Look back through this essay, and for certain you will find that I have again and again committed the very faults I am protesting against.

That is indeed so, but I doubt that he realised just how often he broke his own rules, to the point where it becomes obvious - at least, to me - that the rules don't work at all. Take rule 4, about avoiding the passive, which has often been cited as a desirable linguistic strategy. When criticising examples of 'bad writing' he phrases it this way:

the passive voice is wherever possible used in preference to the active.

The grammarians among you will see that this is itself a passive construction. Orwell uses the passive to condemn the passive, and there are examples of the passive in every paragraph bar one of his essay.

It's easy to see why. The main role of the passive in English is to allow us to say that something happens without having to say who did it. If I say *The cat chased the mouse*, an active sentence, you know who did the action: the cat. If I say *The mouse was chased*, a passive sentence, and stop my sentence there, you don't know who did it. The passive is thus the basis of an impersonal style, and the obvious construction to use whenever we want to avoid identifying the actor. When we see a sign saying *Entry prohibited* we are left in the dark as to who is doing the prohibiting - and that is the point, of course. We never see signs saying 'I prohibit you entry' or 'We prohibit you entry'. The passive allows the message to be conveyed formally, succinctly, and impersonally. It is hugely useful in English, and not only in writing. Anyone who says *I've just had my hair done* or *I've just had my car fixed* is using the passive, precisely because it's not important to know exactly who has done the hair or fixed the car. Orwell ignores all these everyday usages in his blanket condemnation.

But it's not just passives. The opening paragraph of his essay illustrates how often he breaks every one of his own rules:

Most people who bother with the matter at all would admit that the English language is in a bad way, but it is generally assumed that we cannot by conscious action do anything about it. Our civilization is decadent, and our language - so the argument runs - must inevitably share in the general collapse. It follows that any struggle against the abuse of language is a sentimental archaism, like preferring candles to electric light or hansom cabs to aeroplanes. Underneath this lies the half-conscious belief that language is a natural growth and not an instrument which we shape for our own purposes.

Never use a metaphor, simile or other figure of speech which you are used to seeing in print.

But I often see in print metaphors such as *in a bad way*, *it is generally assumed*, *so the argument runs*, *the abuse of language*, and *shape for our own purposes*.

Most people who bother with the matter at all would admit that the English language is **in a bad way**, but **it is generally assumed** that we cannot by conscious action do anything about it. Our civilization is decadent, and our language - **so the argument runs** - must inevitably share in the general collapse. It follows that any struggle against **the abuse of language** is a sentimental archaism, like preferring candles to electric light or hansom cabs to aeroplanes. Underneath this lies the half-conscious belief that language is a natural growth and not an instrument which we **shape for our own purposes**.

Never use a long word where a short one will do.

This all depends on 'how long is long', of course. Anything with four or more syllables is surely long, by any definition, so we have a problem immediately.

Most people who bother with the matter at all would admit that the English language is in a bad way, but it is generally assumed that we cannot by conscious action do anything about it. Our civilization is decadent, and our language - so the argument runs - must inevitably share in the general collapse. It follows that any struggle against the abuse of language is a **sentimental**

archaism, like preferring candles to electric light or hansom cabs to aeroplanes. Underneath this lies the half-conscious belief that language is a natural growth and not an instrument which we shape for our own purposes.

We could argue that he could have replaced *sentimental* by *romantic*, *maudlin*, *dreamy*, or many another shorter word, but none of these quite captures the meaning of *sentimental*. He needs the longer word (even though, in his essay, he lists it along with others as a 'meaningless' word in art criticism). Similarly, *instrument* could have been replaced by *tool*, *organ*, *medium*, and so on.

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*Decadent* isn't so lengthy - a mere three syllables - but it is a word that I would expect Orwell to condemn because of its abstract and subjective meaning, like *patriotic*, *progressive*, and *reactionary*, that he also calls 'meaningless'. It's one of those 'cloudy' words that I suspect he would be angry about if he heard a politician use it.

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On to rule 3:

If it is possible to cut a word out, always cut it out.

So, why is there an *at all* in the opening sentence? 'Most people who bother with the matter' would express the meaning.

Most people who bother with the matter **at all** would admit that the English language is in a bad way, but it is generally assumed that we cannot by conscious action do anything about it. Our civilization is decadent, and our language - so the argument runs - **must inevitably share** in the general collapse. It follows that any struggle against the abuse of language is a sentimental archaism, **like preferring candles to electric light or hansom cabs to aeroplanes**. Underneath this lies the half-conscious belief that language is a natural growth and not an instrument which we shape for our own purposes.

The *at all* of course adds a desirable emphasis, which is what many so-called tautologies do. And what about *must inevitably share*? The sense of obligation is already in the verb *must*, so why is there a need for *inevitably*? It's valuable rhetorical emphasis. And do we need two examples of sentimental archaisms? One would get the point across perfectly well. But of course, two adds variety, an additional vividness, and makes the point more memorable. In short: it's always possible to cut words out, but what do we lose in the process? Orwell would not be Orwell without them.

Rule 4.

Never use the passive where you can use the active.

I've already talked about this, but - as we're here - I should point out that his opening sentence does contain a passive:

Most people who bother with the matter at all would admit that the English language is in a bad way, but **it is generally assumed** that we cannot by conscious action do anything about it. Our civilization is decadent, and our language - so the argument runs - must inevitably share in the general collapse. It follows that any struggle against the abuse of language is a sentimental archaism, like preferring candles to electric light or hansom cabs to aeroplanes. Underneath this lies the half-conscious belief that language is a natural growth and not an instrument which we shape for our own purposes.

And so on to Rule 5:

Never use a foreign phrase, a scientific word or a jargon word if you can think of an everyday English equivalent.

The problem here is that there *aren't* any everyday English equivalents, which is why the words were borrowed in the first place. The strength of English vocabulary lies largely in this borrowing, which is found from the earliest Anglo-Saxon times: triplets such as *kingly* (Old English), *royal* (French) and *regal* (Latin) or *fire* (Old English), *flame* (French), and *conflagration* (Latin) are not simply synonyms: they are stylistically different, and each has its own nuance. We cannot simply replace one by another. We cannot say *The Regal Mail* or *The Regal Shakespeare Company*. Elsewhere in the essay he writes:

there is no real need for any of the hundreds of foreign phrases now current in English.

But if there had never been a need, the words would not have arrived in the first place.

I've never understood why Orwell was so puzzled by loanwords. In another place, a *Tribune* article called 'Why borrow foreign words?' he asks:

One mystery about the English language is why, with the biggest vocabulary in existence, it has to be constantly borrowing foreign words and phrases.

Well the answer, of course, is that this is precisely why it does have the biggest vocabulary. Some 80 per cent of English words have been borrowed - from hundreds of languages. And we cannot do without them. Nor can Orwell. Here's that opening paragraph again:

Most people who bother with the matter at all would admit that the English language is in a bad way, but it is generally assumed that we cannot by conscious action do anything about it. Our civilization is decadent, and our language - so the argument runs - must inevitably share in the general collapse. It follows that any struggle against the abuse of language is a sentimental archaism, like preferring candles to electric light or hansom cabs to aeroplanes. Underneath this lies the half-conscious belief that language is a natural growth and not an instrument which we shape for our own purposes.

Now with the grammatical words omitted, so that we are left only with the content words - the words that carry all the meaning:

people bother matter admit English language bad way generally assumed conscious action civilization decadent language argument runs inevitably share general collapse follows struggle abuse language sentimental archaism preferring candles electric light hansom cabs aeroplanes lies half conscious belief language natural growth instrument shape purposes

First let's highlight all the French words:

**people** bother **matter** admit English **language** bad way **generally** assumed conscious **action** civilization **decadent language argument** runs inevitably share **general** collapse follows struggle **abuse language sentimental** archaism **preferring** candles electric light hansom **cabs aeroplanes** lies half conscious belief **language natural** growth **instrument** shape **purposes**

Now let's highlight the Latin words:

people bother matter **admit** English language bad way generally **assumed conscious** action **civilization** decadent language argument runs **inevitably** share general **collapse** follows struggle abuse language sentimental archaism preferring **candles electric** light hansom cabs aeroplanes lies half **conscious** belief language natural growth instrument shape purposes

Add in one Greek word (*archaism*), and combine the two lists, and we get the following picture:

**people** bother **matter admit** English **language** bad way **generally assumed conscious action civilization decadent language argument** runs **inevitably** share **general collapse** follows struggle **abuse language sentimental** archaism **preferring candles electric** light hansom **cabs aeroplanes** lies half **conscious** belief **language natural** growth **instrument** shape **purposes**

We have one proper name (*Hansom*), and two words whose etymology isn't known (*bother*, *struggle*). That leaves just 12 words out of the 44 that are Anglo-Saxon:

people bother matter admit **English** language **bad way** generally assumed  
conscious action civilization decadent language argument **runs** inevitably **share**  
general collapse **follows** struggle abuse language sentimental archaism  
preferring candles electric **light** hansom cabs aeroplanes **lies half** conscious  
**belief** language natural **growth** instrument **shape** purposes

It's clear that English needs its etymological diversity for its vitality, and absurd to suggest otherwise. Just because a few people use long Latin words when they might use shorter Anglo-Saxon ones is no basis for denying the value of these words in everyday speech and writing.

I am therefore not terribly impressed with Orwell's so-called 'rules', and I would advise anyone to take them with the proverbial pinch of salt. They work well enough in a negative way - as a critique of obscure writing and speaking - but they are no guide to a good style, for every good style needs to break these rules all the time. All the time, note, not just occasionally.

But there's far more to Orwell's views on language than the antagonisms expressed in his famous essay. Obviously, anyone who can write a novel which includes a theme of replacing old words by new must have thought a lot about the power of language, and about the relationship between language and thought. In *Nineteen Eighty-four* we see the consequences when language is used as a mechanism of thought control. We learn of the progress that is being made with the eleventh edition of the Newspeak Dictionary from one of its editors, Syme, who tells Winston (59):

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.

And Syme goes on:

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 also 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.

And so we get the replacement of *bad* by the opposite of *good*: *ungood*, and an opportunity for a linguistic element to help delineate character. Winston notices that his girlfriend Julia (151):

never used Newspeak words, except the ones that had passed into everyday use.

This is where the theme of explicit reference to language takes on a new role: it can become a literary device. Grammar, vocabulary, pronunciation, spelling, punctuation, and other linguistic phenomena can add a dimension to a character, help

evoke an atmosphere, take forward a plot. Orwell isn't alone in doing this: his contemporary Graham Greene does it very frequently.<sup>3</sup> Orwell, not so often - with one exception I'll discuss shortly - but when he does drop a linguistic observation into his writing, it is always telling, and often humorous. Here's John Flory again, in *Burmese Days* (73). The pretty Elizabeth Lackersteen has just arrived in his village, Kyauktada, and been frightened by an unexpected encounter with a water-buffalo. Flory heard her cries, came to her rescue, and has brought her back to his house. He is already in love with her.

FLORY: My fellow here will see you home. It was ever so kind of you to come in. I can't tell you how glad I am to have met you. You'll make such a difference to us here in Kyauktada.

ELIZABETH: Good-bye, Mr -- oh, how funny! I don't even know your name.

FLORY: Flory, John Flory. And yours - Miss Lackersteen, is it?

ELIZABETH: Yes. Elizabeth. Good-bye, Mr Flory. And thank you *ever* so much. That awful buffalo. You quite saved my life.

FLORY: It was nothing. I hope I shall see you at the Club this evening? I expect your uncle and aunt will be coming down. Good-bye for the time being, then.

He stood at the gate, watching them as they went. Elizabeth - lovely name, too rare nowadays. He hoped she spelt it with a 'z'.

It's a tiny point, but character is built up out of an accumulation of tiny points, and language plays its part.

That's an example from orthography. Here's one from vocabulary, from the second chapter of *The Clergyman's Daughter*. Dorothy is trying to get her irritable clergyman father to see what desperate financial straits they are in:

DOROTHY: Father, I don't seem to be able to get you to see how serious things are! We've simply nothing to live on for the next month. I don't even know where the meat's coming from for today's dinner.'

RECTOR: Luncheon, Dorothy, luncheon! I do wish you would drop that abominable lower-class habit of calling the midday meal DINNER!

DOROTHY: For luncheon, then. Where are we to get the meat from?

What we call the meal in the middle of the day has been a usage issue since Victorian times. Even today, children in Britain have school *lunches* served to them by *dinner ladies*.

And here's an example of the use of a term from grammar, in a situation that any author at this Festival will be able to identify with. It's in the opening chapter of *Keep the Aspidistra Flying*, where we learn that Gordon Comstock has an ambition to be a poet, and Orwell, tongue in cheek, shows us the mechanism of poetic creation:

Two lines of a poem struggled for birth in Gordon's mind:

Sharply the something wind - for instance, threatening wind? No, better, menacing wind. The menacing wind blows over - no, sweeps over, say.

The something poplars - yielding poplars? No, better, bending poplars. Assonance between bending and menacing? No matter. The bending poplars, newly bare. Good.

*Sharply the menacing wind sweeps over  
The bending poplars, newly bare.*

Good. 'Bare' is a sod to rhyme; however, there's always 'air', which every poet since Chaucer has been struggling to find rhymes for. But the impulse died away in Gordon's mind. He turned the money over in his pocket. Twopence halfpenny and a Joey [a threepenny piece] - twopence halfpenny. His mind was sticky with boredom. He couldn't cope with rhymes and adjectives. You can't, with only twopence halfpenny in your pocket.

Ain't it the truth? And that's probably the first time the term *adjective* makes a reader laugh in the entire history of English grammar.

There are also examples of linguistic comment in the field that linguists call discourse analysis, which includes the way people talk to each other. We see it in *The Clergyman's Daughter* (4.2), when Dorothy meets Mrs Creevy, the unpleasant, domineering head of a private school where she has found work:

That was always Mrs Creevy's way — she never kept you talking an instant longer than was necessary. Her conversation was so very definite, so exactly to the point, that it was not really conversation at all. Rather, it was the skeleton of conversation; like the dialogue in a badly written novel where everyone talks a little too much in character. But indeed, in the proper sense of the word she did not TALK; she merely said, in her brief shrewish way, whatever it was necessary to say, and then got rid of you as promptly as possible. [30 mins]

We see it, too, in *Keep the Aspidistra Flying* (428), when Gordon Comstock meets the bookseller, Mr Cheeseman. Before I get to the linguistic point, it's worth quoting Orwell's description of Cheeseman, as it's another lovely example of his great ability to paint a visual picture of a person:

Mr Cheeseman was a rather sinister little man, almost small enough to be called a dwarf, with very black hair, and slightly deformed. As a rule a dwarf, when malformed, has a full-sized torso and practically no legs. With Mr Cheeseman it was the other way about. His legs were of normal length, but the top half of his body was so short that his buttocks seemed to sprout almost immediately below his shoulder blades. This gave him, in walking, a resemblance to a pair of scissors. ...

'Oh, eh? Comstock, eh? Come 'is way. Got mi office back here. Bin 'specting you.' ...

A customer comes into the bookshop, buys a sixpenny book, and waits for his change:

Mr Cheeseman did not take the change out of the till - apparently there was no till - but produced a very greasy wash-leather purse from some secret place under his waistcoat. He handled the purse, which was almost lost in his big hands, in a peculiarly secretive way, as though trying to hide it from sight.

'I like t'keep mi money i' mi pocket,' he explained, with an upward glance, as they went into the office.

It was apparent that Mr Cheeseman clipped his words from a notion that words cost money and ought not to be wasted.

Now there are not many examples like these, in Orwell. I've scoured the novels, documentary pieces, diaries, and letters (in the popularly available anthologies) and found only 44 examples, such as the ones already quoted.<sup>4</sup> Some books - *Animal Farm* and *Homage to Catalonia* - contain no instances of linguistic observations at all. But when it comes to pronunciation, we find almost the same number, 43. Orwell has a fascination with accent as an index of social class. He notices it wherever he goes, and often introduces it when he's developing a character. Here's Mrs Lackersteen, in *Burmese Days* (165-6), who has heard that a soldier with an aristocratic background is arriving in the village. In the Club, Flory notices the way she asks if anyone wants to play bridge:

Mrs Lackersteen had begun talking in an extraordinary, silly manner about the dear Prince of Wales, and putting on an accent like a temporarily promoted chorus-girl playing the part of a duchess in a musical comedy. The others wondered privately what the devil was the matter with her. ...

'Well,' said Mrs Lackersteen presently, 'and who's for a rubbah?'

She said quite distinctly a 'rubbah'. Her accent was growing more aristocratic with every word she uttered. It was unaccountable.

In the diaries relating to *The Road to Wigan Pier*, Orwell records the accent of virtually everyone he meets: Mr Hornby in Wigan (32):

Has not much accent.

Mrs Hornby, however:

Very broad accent.

He notices when people change their accent. Mr Wilde, for example (57, 59):

Smartly dressed with gloves and umbrella and very little accent. ... Wilde's accent becomes much broader when he is in these surroundings [the Working Men's Club]

And Orwell is puzzled when he notices the way people change their accent depending on the person they're talking to - what linguists call 'accommodation'. A newspaper canvasser is lodging in the house where he has a room (36):

Cannot quite make this lad out. He puts on Lancashire accent when talking to the others (he belongs locally) but to me talks in the usual 'educated' accent.

Orwell himself had an educated accent, so when he goes on the road as a tramp he tries to adopt a false accent to avoid making himself noticeable, but finds he can't do it well (*The Road to Wigan Pier*, 213):

I cannot proletarianise my accent or certain of my tastes and beliefs, and I would not if I could. Why should I? I don't ask anybody else to speak my dialect; why should anybody else ask me to speak his?

He tries it, nonetheless, and recalls his experience in the same book (140):

At the start it was not easy. It meant masquerading and I have no talent for acting. I cannot, for instance, disguise my accent, at any rate not for more than a very few minutes.

But then he realises that he doesn't need to worry about it (143-4):

To begin with, most people have no ear for accent and judge you entirely by your clothes. I was often struck by this fact when I was begging at back doors. Some people were obviously surprised by my 'educated' accent, others completely failed to notice it. I was dirty and ragged and that was all they saw.

It's the combination of appearance and accent that stops Dorothy in *The Clergyman's Daughter* (Ch. 2.7) finding a room or getting a job as a maid:

Her ragged clothes and her lack of references were against her, and her educated accent, which she did not know how to disguise, wrecked whatever chances she might have had. The tramps and cockney hop-pickers had not noticed her accent, but the suburban housewives noticed it quickly enough, and it scared them in just the same way as the fact that she had no luggage had scared the landladies. The moment they had heard her speak, and spotted her for a gentlewoman, the game was up. She grew quite used to the startled, mystified look that came over their faces as soon as she opened her mouth — the prying, feminine glance from her face to her damaged hands, and from those to the darns in her skirt. Some of the women asked her outright what a girl of her class was doing seeking work as a servant. They sniffed, no doubt, that she had 'been in trouble' — that is, had an illegitimate baby — and after probing her with their questions they got rid of her as quickly as possible.

Orwell had a particular dislike of 'the dreadful BBC accent', even though this was how he himself spoke. Actually, we can't be sure how he spoke, because - surprisingly - no example of his voice has been preserved, even though he made numerous BBC recordings in the early 1940s. Little archiving was done during the War, because storage mediums were in short supply, and there was no interest in preserving programmes as a record of social history. In any case, his broadcasts (for the Far East service) would not have been viewed as priorities for archiving. But stories circulated that he didn't want any of his recordings to be preserved because he didn't like the sound of his own voice - partly because his voice quality was abnormal (thanks to a bullet wound in the throat when he was fighting in the Spanish Civil War in 1937) and partly because he found his accent too posh - a poor reflection of his political views.

So here he is inveighing against the standard BBC accent - what phoneticians call 'received pronunciation' - in an article on documentary film reviews:<sup>5</sup>

since films of this kind need a spoken commentary, why cannot the M.O.I. [Ministry of Information] choose someone who speaks the English language as it is spoken in the street? Some day perhaps it will be realized that that dreadful B.B.C. 'voice,' with its blurred vowels, antagonizes the whole English-speaking

world except for a small area in southern England, and is more valuable to Hitler than a dozen new submarines.

He knows why this accent developed, as he comments in an article for *The Tribune* in 1944:<sup>6</sup>

Everyone complains, for instance, about the Kensingtonian accent of B.B.C. news readers, which has been carefully selected not in order to cause annoyance in England, but because it is a 'neutral' accent which will be intelligible wherever English is spoken.

And he knows very well how valuable this accent is:<sup>7</sup>

If you talk with a BBC accent you can get jobs that a proletarian couldn't get.

But he still finds it an awful accent. Even while seriously ill with TB in hospital at Cranham in 1949, a few months before his death, he records what he hears in his diary, and pulls no punches:<sup>8</sup>

Curious effect, here in the sanatorium, on Easter Sunday when the people in this (the most expensive) block of 'chalets' mostly have visitors, of hearing large numbers of upper-class English voices. I have been almost out of the sound of them for two years,

- he has been living on a remote Scottish island -

hearing them at most one or two at a time, my ears growing more & more used to working-class or lower-middle class Scottish voices. In the hospital at Hairmyres, for instance, I literally never heard a 'cultivated' accent, except when I had a visitor. It is as though I were hearing these voices for the first time. And what voices! A sort of over-fedness, a fatuous self-confidence, a constant bah-bahing of laughter about nothing, above all a sort of heaviness & richness combined with a fundamental ill-will - people who, one instinctively feels, without even being able to see them, are the enemies of anything intelligent or sensitive or beautiful. No wonder everyone hates us so.

The difference between upper-class and lower-class, especially as manifested in their speech, is crucial to Orwell's view of the world. The surprising thing is that he gives us no real detail about it, other than one point: upper-class people pronounce /h/ in words like *hot* and *hat* and working-class people don't. 'Keeping or dropping aitches' is a recurrent theme in all his writing. He sees aitches as an index not just of social background but of temperament and mood. They turn up repeatedly in *Coming Up for Air*. George Bowling's father does it. When teenage George asks for his first grown-up suit for work, his father refuses, and they have a row (98):

the conversation ... degenerated into a long, nagging kind of argument, with Father gradually getting angry and repeating over and over - dropping an aitch now and again, as he was apt to do when he got angry - 'Well, you can't 'ave it. Make up your mind to that - you can't 'ave it'.

Hardly surprising, then, to find both George and his elder brother doing the same thing. At one point the young George has followed Joe and his mates in the hope of joining them:

Joe turned and saw me. 'Christ!' he said. 'It's the kid.' He walked up to me like a tom-cat that's going to start a fight. 'Now then, you! What'd I tell you? You get back 'ome double quick.'

Both Joe and I were inclined to drop our aitches if we were at all excited. I backed away from him.

'I'm not going back 'ome'.

But as George makes his way in the world, he does something about it (101):

Between sixteen and eighteen ... I cured myself of dropping aitches and got rid of most of my Cockney accent.

It's something that many others have done. And later in life, when he returns to his home village to find his teenage love Elsie, it's one of the first things he notices (219):

How bad her accent had got. Or maybe I was just imagining that, because my own standards had changed? But no, she used to be so 'superior', all the girls at Lilywhite's were so 'superior', and she'd been a member of the vicar's Reading Circle. I swear she never used to drop her aitches. It's queer how these women go to pieces once they're married.

Everyone is affected, even those who start revolutions. In *The Road to Wigan Pier* (45) he reflects gloomily:

I should not like to be shot for having an intelligent face, but I do agree that in almost any revolt the leaders would tend to be people who could pronounce their aitches.

And of course, those wanting to escape the effects of an oppressive upper-class regime would do the opposite. Winston and Julia, in *Nineteen Eighty-Four* (175) fantasize about a future away from the control of Big Brother:

they would disappear, alter themselves out of recognition, learn to speak with proletarian accents, get jobs in a factory...

Everyone is affected, and Orwell doesn't exclude characters in fiction. When he explores the world of boys' weekly adventure stories, he notices:<sup>9</sup>

as usual, the heroic characters all have to talk B.B.C.; they may talk Scottish or Irish or American, but no one in a star part is ever permitted to drop an aitch.

And his interests take him back to Charles Dickens:<sup>10</sup>

He likes a bourgeois exterior and a bourgeois (not aristocratic) accent. One curious symptom of this is that he will not allow anyone who is to play a heroic part to speak like a working man.

He mentions little Pip in *Great Expectations*:

Little Pip, for instance, is brought up by people speaking broad Essex, but talks upper-class English from his earliest childhood; actually he would have talked the same dialect as Joe, or at least as Mrs Gargery.

And he lists some of the characters who speak the Dickensian equivalent of the BBC accent. He is especially scathing when he quotes David Copperfield's reaction when he hears that Uriah Heep is plotting to marry Agnes Wickfield (58):

'Oh, Master Copperfield, with what a pure affection do I love the ground my Agnes walks on.'

I believe I had the delirious idea of seizing the red-hot poker out of the fire, and running him through with it.

Orwell comments:

it is the thought of the 'pure' Agnes in bed with a man who drops his aitches that really revolts Dickens.

So, dropping aitches is an index of character as well as a social comment; but it is the social comment that is Orwell's main motivation for making so many references to it. Indeed, it is such a critical issue that it provides the final rhetorical flourish in *The Road to Wigan Pier* (215). After expressing his hope for the future of socialism, he closes the book with this sentence:

And then perhaps this misery of class-prejudice will fade away, and we of the sinking middle class - the private schoolmaster, the half-starved free-lance journalist, the colonel's spinster daughter with £75 a year, the jobless Cambridge graduate, the ships' officer without a ship, the clerks, the civil servants, the commercial travellers and the thrice-bankrupt drapers in the country towns - may sink without further struggles into the working class where we belong, and probably when we get there it will not be so dreadful as we feared, for, after all, we have nothing to lose but our aitches. [46.15]

'E might 'ave added to 'is list: middle-clahss itinerant professors of linguistics with a working-class 'istory - like this one.

1 W F Bolton & D Crystal (eds), *The English Language: Essays by Linguists and Men of Letters 1858-1964*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. The essay was originally published in *Horizon*, April 1946.

2 There are 14 words whose first recorded use in English is found in Orwell, according to the *OED*. From *Nineteen eighty-four*, along with *-speak*, *Oldspeak* and *Newspeak*, we have *doublethink*, *prole*, and *unperson*. *Marxize* ('to be in accord with Marxism') turns up in *Inside the Whale*, where literature is said to have been *Marxized*. There are two culture-restricted items: *sprowsie* ('sixpenny piece') is in his list of local slang terms at the end of his essay on 'Hop-picking' (117); and *pani-wallah* ('water-carrier') is there in *Burmese Days* (p. 246). His penchant for *-y* endings is seen in four coinages: *junky* ('worthless') in 'Books vs Cigarettes', *snootily* (Letters, 177), *mackintoshy*, describing a smell in *Coming Up for Air* (242), and *nancifully* ('in an effeminate way') in *Keep the Aspidistra Flying* (262).

He is also the first recorded user of *soft-centre*, describing chocolates (in a 1947 *Tribune* essay) - the significance of which escapes me.

3 'Going especially careful in *The Third Man*: a linguistic exploration', in Dermot Gilvary & Darren J N Middleton (eds), *Dangereous Edges of Graham Greene* (New York & London: Continuum, 2011), 128-48, 290-3.

4 The others are listed in the Appendix to this paper.

5 *Time and Tide*, 15 February 1941, reprinted in *Seeing*, 142.

6 'The BBC', *The Tribune*, 21 January 1944, reprinted in *Seeing*, 256.

7 'London letter', *Partisan Review*, 8 May 1942, reprinted in *Seeing*, 164.

8 *Diaries* 505, 17 April 1949.

9 'Boys' weeklies', 1940, reprinted in *Essays*, 96.

10 'Charles Dickens', reprinted in *Essays*, 56.

## Appendix

This Appendix lists all the places where I have found Orwell explicitly commenting on language. The list excludes the examples used in the paper, as well as the following sources, where an entire piece is devoted to a linguistic theme:

'Hop-picking Diary', 1931, in *Decline*, appendix 117-18 on the slang expressions encountered

*Down and Out in Paris and London*, Ch. 32 on London slang and swearing

*Coming Up for Air*, 1939, Part 2, Ch. 6 about the joy of reading

The Appendix to *1984* on the principles of Newspeak

*Seeing*, 395 on four-letter words, 415 on spelling reform

'Why Borrow Foreign Words', *Tribune*, 21 April 1944, reprinted in *Seeing*

## On accents

'The Spike', 1931, reprinted in *Essays*, 8

This was Scotty, a little hairy tramp with a bastard accent sired by cockney out of Glasgow.

'Hop-picking Diary', 1931, in *Decline*, 99

[while on the road as a tramp, he meets a gentleman] His manner was so friendly that I forgot to put on my cockney accent, and he looked closely at me and said how painful it must be for a man of my stamp etc. [and gives him a shilling]

107

After I had mixed with these people for a few days it was too much fag to go on putting on my cockney accent, and they noticed that I talked 'different'. As usual, this made them still more friendly, for these people seem to think that it is especially dreadful to 'come down in the world'.

*Down and Out in Paris and London*, 1933

130

[in London] dressed as I was, I was half afraid that the police might arrest me as a vagabond, and I dared not speak to anyone, imagining that they must notice a disparity between my accent and my clothes.

186

[of a tramp] I heard him speak, and he had a goodish accent, as of a clerk or shopwalker.

*Burmese Days*, 1934, 17

[Ellis] deliberately exaggerated his Cockney accent, because of the sardonic tone it gave to his words.

*The Clergyman's Daughter*, 1935, Ch. 3.2

Dorothy did not know it, but her educated accent, which had made it impossible to get work as a servant, was an invaluable asset to her as a beggar.

*The Road to Wigan Pier* Diary, 1936, in *Diaries*

30

[visiting Meades in Manchester] Both are working-class people, speak with Lancashire accents and have worn the clogs in their childhood.

33

[listening to an orator] A poor speaker, using all the padding and cliches of the Socialist orator, and with the wrong kind of cockney accent...

51

Accent in Sheffield not so broad as in Lancashire.

69

The trouble with all these Communist speakers is that instead of using the popular idiom they employ immensely long sentences full of 'despite' and 'notwithstanding' and 'be that as it may' etc ... and this in spite of always speaking with broad provincial or cockney accents – Yorkshire in this case. I suppose they are given set speeches which they learn by heart.

*Morocco Diary*, 1938-9

110

[of Robert Parr] Speaks French, very careful and grammatically very correct, but very strong English accent and manner while speaking of mentally going over grammar rules.

129

[of Rowlands] 'Superior' type and curious accent which might belong to an Eurasian.

*Keep the Aspidistra Flying*, 1936, 368

[of a waiter] He looked like a Russian prince; probably he was an Englishman and had assumed a foreign accent because this was proper in a waiter.

*The Road to Wigan Pier*, 1937

11

[about Mr Hooker] Mr Brooker had a queer way of pronouncing his name, without the H and with a long U - 'Uker'.

106

All the Northern accents, for instance, persist strongly, while the Southern ones are collapsing before the movies and the BBC. Hence your 'educated' accent stamps you

rather as a foreigner than as a chunk of the petty gentry; and this is an immense advantage, for it makes it much easier to get into contact with the working class.  
117

But it was not long before I was forbidden to play with the plumber's children; they were 'common' and I was told to keep away from them. This was snobbish, if you like, but it was also necessary, for middle-class people cannot afford to let their children grow up with vulgar accents.

120

Everyone who has grown up pronouncing his aitches and in a house with a bathroom and one servant is likely to have grown up with these feelings [repulsion about the working-class body]; hence the chasmic, impassable quality of class-distinctions in the West.

131

[on working-class people] I was still revolted by their accents and intimidated by their habitual rudeness. ... They still vaguely expected the Utopia for which they had fought, and even more than before they were openly hostile to the aitch-pronouncing class.

143-4

[on noticing his accent] To begin with, most people have no ear for accent and judge you entirely by your clothes. I was often struck by this fact when I was begging at back doors. Some people were obviously surprised by my 'educated' accent, others completely failed to notice it. I was dirty and ragged and that was all they saw. Again, tramps come from all parts of the British Isles and the variation in English accents is enormous. A tramp is used to hearing all kinds of accents among his mates, some of them so strange to him that he can hardly understand them, and a man from, say, Cardiff or Durham or Dublin does not necessarily know which of the south English accents is an 'educated' one. In any case men with 'educated' accents, though rare among tramps, are not unknown.

209

And even the aitchless millionaire, though sometimes he goes to an elocutionist and learns a BBC accent, seldom succeeds in disguising himself as completely as he would like to. It is in fact very difficult to escape, culturally, from the class into which you have been born.

*Coming Up for Air*, 1939

100

[he had at 16] a voice with just a trace of a Cockney accent

101

Between sixteen and eighteen ... I cured myself of dropping aitches and got rid of most of my Cockney accent. (In the Thames Valley the country accents were going out. Except for the farm lads, nearly everyone who was born later than 1890 talked Cockney.)

'Charles Dickens', 1939, in *Essays*, 56

He likes a bourgeois exterior and a bourgeois (not aristocratic) accent. One curious symptom of this is that he will not allow anyone who is to play a heroic part to speak like a working man. A comic hero like Sam Weller, or a merely pathetic figure like Stephen Blackpool, can speak with a broad accent, but the *jeune premier* always speaks the then equivalent of the B.B.C. This is so, even when it involves absurdities. Little Pip, for instance, is brought up by people speaking broad Essex, but talks upper-

class English from his earliest childhood; actually he would have talked the same dialect as Joe, or at least as Mrs Gargery. So also with Bidley Wopsle, Lizzie Hexam, Sissie Jupe, *Oliver Twist* - one ought perhaps to add Little Dorrit. Even Rachel in *Hard Times* has barely a trace of Lancashire accent, an impossibility in her case.

'Rudyard Kipling', 1940, in *Essays*, 208

[on the private soldier] He is always made to speak in a sort of stylized cockney, not very broad but with all the aitches and final 'g's carefully omitted. Very often the result is as embarrassing as the humorous recitation at a church social. And this accounts for the curious fact that one can often improve Kipling's poems, make them less facetious and less blatant, by simply going through them and transplanting them from cockney into standard speech.

### **Grammar, spelling, and punctuation**

*Down and Out in Paris and London*, 1933

163

Bozo had a strange way of talking, Cocknified and yet very lucid and expressive. It was as though he had read good books but had never troubled to correct his grammar.

*Coming Up for Air*, 1939, 73

The hot sticky afternoons in the big schoolroom when I've sprawled across my desk, with old Blowers's voice grating away about predicates and subjunctives and relative clauses, and all that's in my mind is the backwater near Burford Weir and the green pool under the willows with the dace gliding to and fro.

*Letters*

48

[15 January 1935] Have you ever seen Fowler's *Modern English Usage*? Fowler is the man who did, or at any rate contributed to, the small Oxford dictionary, and he is a great authority on syntax etc. He is very amusing about such things as the split infinitive.

367

[22 October 1947] Did you know by the way that this book hasn't got a semicolon in it? I had decided about that time [1939] that the semicolon is an unnecessary stop and that I would write my next book without one. [in fact there are three]

### **Vocabulary and names**

*Down and Out in Paris and London*, 1933, 180

It is a pity that someone capable of dealing with the subject does not keep a year-book of London slang and swearing, registering the changes accurately. It might throw useful light upon the formation, development and obsolescence of words.

*The Clergyman's Daughter*, 1935, Ch 1. 3

Meanwhile, she had got to settle about the meat for today's dinner — luncheon. (Dorothy was careful to obey her father and call it LUNCHEON, when she

remembered it. On the other hand, you could not in honesty call the evening meal anything but 'supper'; so there was no such meal as 'dinner' at the Rectory.)

*Keep the Aspidistra Flying*, 1936, 283

'Gordon Comstock' was a pretty bloody name, but then Gordon came from a pretty bloody family. The 'Gordon' part of it was Scotch, of course. The prevalence of such names nowadays is merely a part of the Scotchification of England that has been going on these last fifty years. 'Gordon', 'Colin', 'Malcolm', 'Donald' - these are the gifts of Scotland to the world, along with golf, whisky, porridge and the works of Barrie and Stevenson.

*Coming Up for Air*, 1939, 9

[George Bowling talks about his 7 and 11 year old kids] As for their conversation, it's just unbearable. They're at that dreary bread-and-butter age when a kid's mind revolves round things like rulers, pencil-boxes and who got top marks in French.

17

[Someone calls George Bowling 'Tubby'] But what's interesting, I think, is that merely because you happen to be a little bit fat, almost anyone, even a total stranger, will take it for granted to give you a nickname that's an insulting comment on your personal appearance.

76

There's a kind of peacefulness even in the names of English coarse fish. Roach, rudd, dace, bleak, barbel, bream, gudgeon, pike, chub, carp, tench. They're solid kind of names.

'Rudyard Kipling', 1942, in *Essays*, 211

Kipling is the only English writer of our time who has added phrases to the language. The phrases and neologisms which we take over and use without remembering their origin do not always come from writers we admire. It is strange, for instance, to hear the Nazi broadcasters referring to the Russian soldiers as 'robots', thus unconsciously borrowing a word from a Czech democrat whom they would have killed if they could have laid hands on him.

'Insulting nicknames', *Tribune*, 10 December 1943, reprinted in *Seeing*

Is there anything that one can do about this, as an individual? One can at least remember that the colour problem exists. And there is one small precaution which is not much trouble, and which can perhaps do a little to mitigate the horrors of the colour war. That is to avoid using insulting nicknames. It is an astonishing thing that few journalists, even in the Left-wing press, bother to find out which names are and which are not resented by members of other races. The word 'native,' which makes any Asiatic boil with rage, and which has been dropped even by British officials in India these ten years past, is flung about all over the place. 'Negro' is habitually printed with a small n, a thing most Negroes resent. One's information on these matters needs to be kept up to date. I have just been carefully going through the proofs of a reprinted book of mine [*Burmese Days*], cutting out the word 'Chinaman' wherever it occurred and substituting 'Chinese.' The book was written less than a dozen years ago, but in the intervening time 'Chinaman' has become a deadly insult. Even 'Mahomedan' is now beginning to be resented: one should say 'Moslem.' These things are childish, but then nationalism is childish. And after all we ourselves do not actually like being called 'Limeys' or 'Britishers.'

'Why Borrow Foreign Words', *Tribune*, 21 April 1944, reprinted in *Seeing*, 274  
One mystery about the English language is why, with the biggest vocabulary in existence, it has to be constantly borrowing foreign words and phrases. Where is the sense, for instance, of saying *cul de sac* when you mean *blind alley*? ... There are dozens more of them. Other needless borrowings come from Latin ...and since the war we have been much infested by German words... In nearly every case an English equivalent already exists or could easily be improvised. There is also a tendency to take over American slang phrases without understanding their meaning. ... Sometimes it is necessary to take over a foreign word, but in that case we should anglicise its pronunciation, as our ancestors used to do. ... 'Garage' should be pronounced 'garridge.' ... And why is it that most of us never use a word of English origin if we can find a manufactured Greek one? [flower names]

### Style and varieties of English

*Down and Out in Paris and London*, 1933, 22

[Boris suggests Orwell should become a waiter] You say you go in for writing. Writing is bosh. There is only one way to make money at writing, and that is to marry a publisher's daughter.

*Burmese Days*, 1934

20

The butler says 'I find it very difficult to keep ice cool now.' The obnoxious Ellis replies: 'Don't talk like that, damn you - "I find it very difficult!" Have you swallowed a dictionary? "please, master, can't keeping ice cool" - that's how you ought to talk. We shall have to sack the fellow if he gets to talk English too well. I can't stick servants who talk English.'

120

[U Po Kyin harangues his wife] I should have thought even a fool would have seen that I am raising this rebellion merely in order to crush it. I am - what is that expression Mr Macgregor uses? *Agent provocateur* - Latin, you would not understand.

*Letters*, 44

[29 November 1934] It seems likely to me that after a century, or even fifty years, English and American will no longer be the same language – which will be a shame because the Australians and Canadians etc will probably prefer to follow the Americans.

*The Clergyman's Daughter*, 1935, 4.4

There's plenty of other subjects that look well on the prospectus. French, for instance — French looks VERY well on the prospectus. But it's not a subject you want to waste much time over. Don't go filling them up with a lot of grammar and syntax and verbs and all that. That kind of stuff doesn't get them anywhere so far as I can see. Give them a bit of "Parley vous Francey", and "Passey moi le beurre", and so forth; that's a lot more use than grammar.

Review of Henry Miller, *Tropic of Cancer*, 1935, reprinted in *Seeing*, 39

The American language is less flexible and refined than the English, but it has more life in it, perhaps.

*The Road to Wigan Pier*, 1937, 145

[on a novelist writing about an upper-class person] he guys him more or less instinctively. There is an important subsidiary cause of this in the poverty of the modern upper-class dialect. The speech of 'educated' people is now so lifeless and characterless that a novelist can do nothing with it. By far the easiest way of making it amusing is to burlesque it, which means pretending that every upper-class person is an ineffectual ass.

*Coming Up for Air*, 1939, 9

[George Bowling talks about his 7 and 11 year old kids] As for their conversation, it's just unbearable. They're at that dreary bread-and-butter age when a kid's mind revolves round things like rulers, pencil-boxes and who got top marks in French.

'Boys' weeklies', 1940, reprinted in *Essays*

80

All the principal characters in both papers (*Magnet*, *Gem*) ... talking almost exactly the same dialect.

81

The slang ('Go and eat coke!', 'What the thump!', 'You frabjous ass!', etc. etc.) has never been altered, so that the boys are now using slang which is at least thirty years out of date.

'Inside the whale', 1940, reprinted in *Essays*, 105

[on Miller's *Tropic of Cancer* and *Black Spring*] In them, English is treated as a spoken language, but spoken *without fear*, i.e. without fear of rhetoric or of the unusual or poetic word. The adjective has come back, after ten years' exile. It is a flowing, swelling prose, a prose with rhythms in it, something quite different from the flat, cautious statements and snack-bar dialects that are now in fashion.

'The lion and the unicorn', 1940, reprinted in *Essays*, 147

Nearly every Englishman of working-class origin considers it effeminate to pronounce a foreign word correctly.

'Imaginary interview: George Orwell and Jonathan Swift', 6 November 1942, reprinted in *Seeing*, 195

Swift: On my way here I looked in at some of your fashionable clubs and suburban coffee shops, and listened to the conversation. I half believed that that little Essay of mine was being parodied. If there was any change, it was only that the English tongue had lost something of its earthy natural quality.

'Raffles and Miss Blandish', 1944, reprinted in *Essays*, 263

the curious fact of *No Orchids* being written - with technical errors, perhaps, but certainly with considerable skill - in the American language.

'Notes on nationalism', 1945, reprinted in *Essays*, 305

All nationalists consider it a duty to spread their own language to the detriment of rival languages, and among English-speakers this struggle reappears in subtler form as a struggle between dialects. Anglophone Americans will refuse to use a slang phrase if they know it to be of British origin, and the conflict between Latinizers and

Germanizers often has nationalist motives behind it. Scottish nationalists insist on the superiority of Lowland Scots, and Socialists whose nationalism takes the form of class hatred tirade against the B.B.C. accent and even the broad A.

'Scottish nationalism', *Tribune*, 14 February 1947, reprinted in *Seeing*, 412

At one time I would have said that it is absurd to keep alive an archaic language like Gaelic, spoken by only a few hundred thousand people. Now I am not so sure. To begin with, if people feel that they have a special culture which ought to be preserved, and that the language is part of it, difficulties should not be put in their way when they want their children to learn it properly. Secondly, it is probable that the effort of being bi-lingual is a valuable education in itself.

*Nineteen Eighty-Four*, 1949  
265

[Ampleforth] 'Has it ever occurred to you,' he said, 'that the whole history of English poetry has been determined by the fact that the English language lacks rhymes?'

*Nineteen Eighty-four*, 1949, 54

[Winston] began dictating in Big Brother's familiar style: a style at once military and pedantic, and, because of a trick of asking questions and then promptly answering them ('What lessons do we learn from this fact, comrades? The lesson - which is also one of the fundamental principles of Ingsoc - that,' etc. etc.) easy to imitate.