UNIT 11: GEORGE ORWELL: "POLITICS AND THE ENGLISH LANGUAGE"

UNIT STRUCTURE

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11.1 LEARNING OBJECTIVES

After going through this unit, you will be able to:

- describe the life and works of the novelist, short story writer and essayist George Orwell
- explain the essay "Politics and the English Language"
- give an outline of the important themes of the essay
- discuss the style ad techniques of Orwell

11.2 INTRODUCTION

This unit deals with George Orwell's essay "Politics and the English Language". The essay was published in *The Horizon* in the year 1946. Orwell's work is essentially an attempt to expose the pretensions and lies that are made up by unscrupulous people for their own gains. Language is an important tool used for the manipulation. In the essay, it is seen that Orwell supports clarity in speech and writing, especially when it has a socio-political aim to perform. Let us now start with a discussion on the life and works of the essayist.

11.3 GEORGE ORWELL: LIFE AND WORKS

George Orwell is the pseudonym of Eric Arthur Blair, who was a novelist, short story writer and essayist.He was primarily known as a writer whose works was political by nature and had a social role to perform in creating within his readers a better understanding of the society they lived in. Orwell was born on June 25th, 1903 in Bengal of erstwhile colonized India. His father, Richard Walmsesley Blair worked as an official under civil service in India and his mother, Ida Mabel Blair was the daughter of a French businessman settled in Burma. Orwell had an elder and one younger sister, Marjorie and Avril. When he was a year old, his mother took him to England with Marjorie.

Orwell received his school education in Cyprian's Prep School which played a significant role in his development as a writer. After school, he received his higher education in Eton College. Later, Orwell went on to serve the Indian Imperial Police in Burma between the period of 1922 to 1927. It was his experiences in the colonies that inspired his first novel *Burmese Days (1934)* and other non-fictional prose works "Shooting an Elephant" and "A Hanging". These works reflected his idea of "the white man's burden" which showed how the colonizer had to pretend in front of the natives of the colonized as someone he is not. Orwell's personal experiences in the colonies left him disillusioned about the aims of the British Empire. Consequently, he resigned to escape from the trap of Imperialism and as a protest against the domination of man over man. After returning home, he began to do some temporary jobs in Paris and London, and began to live and know about the lives of the tramps. This was a period of struggle for him as he worked hard to get his work published. Orwell's tryst with the tramps inspired the works *Down and Out in Paris and London* and the second novel *A Clergyman's Daughter* (1935) that describes the adventures of Dorothy Hare who loses her memory and escapes from her sheltered life to live among the vagrants and hop-pickers of Kent.

Orwell, then began working in a bookshop in Hampstead and during this time his work *Keep the Aspidistra Flying* was published in 1936. Later

he was sponsored by the publisher Victor Golloncz to travel in the north, and the journey resulted in his better understanding of the unemployment, proletariat ideas and socialism. The result of the journey was the work *The Road to Wigan Pier,* published in the year 1937. The political ideas behind his literary works became stronger and more prominent in later works such as *Homage to Catalonia* and *Coming up for Air* which were published in the years 1938 and 1939 respectively. These works were seen as criticism against the idea of warfare. By that time, Orwell was recognised as a political writer and a staunch supporter of socialist democracy who openly spoke against any form of oppression. Orwell's wife Eileen worked in the office of the Ministry of Censorship which was located in Central London. As they were childless, the couple decided to adopt a child. Apart from his writing work, Orwell was also commissioned to work for the BBC to broadcast news for a period of time. But later he chose to resign.

During the last decade of his life, Orwell became very active in writing. His collections of essays *Inside the Whale* (1940), *Critical Essays* (1946) and *Shooting an Elephant* (1950) are considered to be among his finest works. However, he is better known for his two political satires *Animal Farm* (1945) and *Nineteen Eighty Four* (1949). This was also the time when he lost his wife Eileen (in 1945). Three years later he got married to Sonia Brownell, shortly before his death. Orwell breathed his last in the year 1950 after years of suffering from tuberculosis.He was buried in Oxfordshire.



CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

Q 1: What is the real name of George Orwell?

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Q 2: Why did George Orwell resign from Indian Imperial Police?

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Q 3: What are two of the most popular satires by George Orwell?

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11.4 EXPLANATION OF THE ESSAY

George Orwell begins by claiming that when the civilization reaches a point of decadence, so does the language. Political speech and writing is largely used as a tool to defend the action of those factions whose action is subjected to critical scrutiny. As a twentieth century writer, Orwell mentions some of the events of his contemporary age that drew the attention of the public and was subjected to questioning. Action such as the colonization and imperial rule of Britain over the Indian subcontinent, the dropping of the atom bombs on Japan during the World War, would not be defended without erring people worldwide. For situations such as the ones, the factions that are involved would make use of a political rhetoric comprising euphemism, question-begging and vague statements that would justify their cause. Orwell cites instances of usage of such politically astute language. When defenceless villages are bombed, the livestock destroyed and the inhabitants of such places are forced to move elsewhere, the action is termed as *pacification.* Terms such as *transfer of population* or *rectification of frontiers* are used to support the removal of peasants and farmers from their farm-lands to be used for some corporate project. Or words such as *elimination of unreliable elements* is used to defend the action of imprisoning people for years without a fair trial and later executed or sent off to die in some unhealthy location. In reality, such phrases hide the real picture and the uglier side of the oppression that some people are subjected to.

Orwell points out that the chief hurdle that stands on the way of expressing oneself clearly is insincerity on the part of the concerned speaker or writer. When a person's real aims and motives are different from the ones that he declare publicly, he will instinctively make use of long words and outdated idioms to justify his cause. Orwell compares it to a cuttlefish spurting out its ink. The insincerity of the writer in fact affects the entire society. It brings about a decline of the language as people, mostly the politicians, would begin to imitate the art of disguising their true intentions behind euphemisms and unusually long and meaningless sentences.

According to him, when a language declines it would lead to foolish thoughts as people would fail to think in a clear manner. Often “pretentious diction” and “meaningless words” help in camouflaging the truth. ‘‘Pretentious language” is used to make certain biased actions or situations unbiased while “meaningless words” prevent the reader from seeing the real point of the statement.

Orwell asserts such lack of clarity in language is not confined to just political language. In certain types of writing such as art criticism and literary criticism, it is quite common to come across sentences that hardly mean anything sensible. Orwell cites examples from five passages of various texts that reflect the flaws in language that most users of the English language suffer from. He quotes passages from different pieces of writings, pointing out the blunders that writers are often susceptible to.This include a passage from an essay written by Harold Laski where he uses five negatives within a span of fifty three words, an excerpt from Lancelot Hogben’s essay on psychology in *Politics* that shows the writer’s faulty use of mixed metaphors, a communist pamphlet where there is the use of a large number of outdated and overused phrases, and an excerpt from a reader’s letter in *Tribune* which hardly made any sense. Orwell identifies from the above stated examples words and phrases that make the English language vague and devoid of meaning. He categorizes them under the terms *dying metaphors*, *operators of false limbs*, *pretentious diction* and *meaningless words*.

According to Orwell, the problem with modern day prose writers was their inability to express themselves with clarity and their use of “pretentious Latinized style”. Writers often make the mistake of unnecessarily lengthening the sentence without seeking words that are meant to reflect the real meaning. This blunder occurs more in the case of political writing where the writer writes in “a lifeless imitative style”. The political rhetoric is meant to support the causes of the speaker/writer and in the process high sounding words and euphemism is used that confuses the listener/reader. The true meaning is never understood. Bad writing habits

can spread as people often begin to imitate it. As such, Orwell believes that writers must develop the habit of thinking clearly as it is the first step meant for political regeneration. He also declares that his aim in the essay is not to criticise the literary use of the language, rather he scrutinizes language that is used to express one’s opinion and not a tool for hiding or disrupting the thoughts and ideas.

Further, Orwell goes on to give another example from an excerpt of translation of *Ecclesiastes*. After the translation of the original into modern English prose, it is found that the beauty of the words of the original text is lost. This is because the translation fails to represent the true meaning of the words that was seen in the original. Blindly translating the text only lead to further confusion as the striking images or phrases used in the original text is missing in the translation. In relation to this, Orwell tells us about Mrs Cicely Vaughan Wilkes, nicknamed as Flip, who was the wife of his school headmaster. Mrs Wilkes taught Orwell English and often used the same method as the one used by Orwell, to teach her pupils about good writing. She would use simple passages from King James *Bible* and translate them in to poor English to highlight the clarity and excellence of the original text. Later, Walter John Christie who followed George Orwell to Eton pointed out that the qualities of simplicity, clarity and absence of meaningless terms while using the English language was taught by Mrs Wilkes and this practice was later seen in Orwell’s writings.

The essayist mentions that it is very easy for contemporary writers to engage in a bad writing style like the ones that he has described. People are often tempted to used meaningless and colloquial phrases out of habit because they are used to hearing or reading them somewhere. Such phrases not only cause a decline in the person’s own writing and speaking style but also tarnish the English language. As such Orwell comes to the conclusion that it is possible to prevent further decadence of the English language by following six rules that would enable one to communicate his thoughts and ideas with clarity. Orwell, however, adds that a person might follow all the six rules and still continue writing bad English. Nevertheless

these six rules would enable the practice and usage of English language in a sensible way.

The first rule that Orwell postulates is that one should never use a metaphor, simile or any other figure of speech that one is used to seeing in print. The first rule is related to the English figures of speech. Phrases such as *Achilles' heel*, *melting pot, Hotbed*, etc. are instances of outdated metaphors. Orwell argues that metaphors of this kind lessen the original meaning of these phrases since the person using these phrases in the contemporary time is hardly familiar with the true meaning of those sentences and why they were originally used. Consequently, people rely on imitating phrases without understanding the real meaning of the words they use.

Secondly, the essayist mentions that one should never use a long word when a short one could suffice. Thirdly, if it is possible to cut a word out of a sentence, always cut it out. Fourthly, one should never use the passive voice and instead try to assert things in the active voice. Fifthly, Orwell mentions that it is better to avoid the use of a foreign phrase, a scientific word, or a jargon when one already has an English equivalent. Lastly, he points out that rather than blindly following these rules and expressing oneself in a bad language, it is better to break the previously mentioned rules if necessity demands.



CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

Q 4: When and where did the essay "Politics and the English Language" appear?

Q 5: What, according to Orwell, is the greatest hurdle in expressing oneself?

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Q 6: What are the four categories identified by Orwell that makes English language vague?

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Q 7: Why should writers avoid metaphors?

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11.5 MAJOR THEMES

Under this section, you will read about the themes in the essay ‘‘Politics and the English Language.’’ The major themes that we find in the essay are the themes of politics and its use of language as a tool of manipulation and the use of correct English. George Orwell has given much importance to the way how the English language is used. He begins the essay by drawing instances from significant events of his age such as impact of British rule in India, war in Vietnam, the impact of the World War, etc. He tells us that political rhetoric is shaped in such a way that it never shows the true intention of the speaker or writer. Vague words and phrases combined with outdated idioms often confuse the listener or the reader. This grows into a habit and soon more people begin to imitate such unclear style of expressing themselves. Orwell considers such practice as harmful for the language and the society. He believes that the writers, especially socio-political writers, have a far greater role to play because people often immitate from what they read. For this purpose he has given examples from five different published writings such as a part of Harold Laski’s essay, an excerpt from a reader’s letter, a section from a Communist pamphlet, etc to show the mistakes that political writers often make.

George Orwell, then, goes on to show how certain literary devices such as metaphors, similes, idioms, etc. are used in an incorrect way by writers, leading to the decadence of the English language. As such, he believes in six rules to be followed by the writer or speaker of the English language.The first rule Orwell states is that one should never use a metaphor, simile or any other figure of speech that one is used to seeing in print.

Secondly, the essayist mentions that one should never use a long word when a short one could suffice. Thirdly, if it is possible to cut a word out of a sentence, always cut it out. Fourthly, one should never use the passive voice and instead try to assert things in the active voice. Fifthly, Orwell mentions that it is better to avoid the use of a foreign phrase, a scientific word, or a jargon when one already has an English equivalent.

Lastly, he points out that rather than blindly following these rules and expressing oneself in a bad language, it is better to break the previously mentioned rules if necessity demands.

11.6 STYLE AND LANGUAGE

Orwell, in keeping with the subject of the essay, has written in a clear and lucid style. Orwell avoids any use of ornamental words, or metaphors and similes that would be difficult for the readers to understand. The essay, in fact, is a practical example illustrating how the English language could be used in an eloquent and coherent style without any special literary devices. The essayist has given examples, wherever necessary, to elaborate the significant points. For instance, he cites five passages quoted from five different published works to point out the common mistakes, writers in English, often make. He has also provided us with an example of a translated work – some lines from *Ecclesiastes* –to show how a badly done translation leads to the loss of the beauty of the words in the original text. In doing so, however, Orwell does not write in a snobbish or pompous way. Rather, he writes with a personal and subjective tone, enlightening the readers about the gradual downfall of the English language because of its misuse. The essayist has also stated six important rules to be followed while speaking or writing in English, especially in situations that affect the society at large.



CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

Q 8: What is the major theme of the essay?

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Q 9: Write a note on Orwell's style.

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11.7 LET US SUM UP

After reading the unit, you have been familiar with the writings of George Orwell. A novelist, short story writer and an essayist, Orwell's works have significantly contributed to literature. You are well aware of the life and works of George Orwell. Also, you are familiar with the essay "Politics and the English Language" that deals with the themes of politics and its use of language as a tool of manipulation and the use of correct English. You are now able to explain the text and point out its major concerns. Apart from this, you are familiar with the style and language of Orwell.



11.8 FURTHER READING

1. Birch, Dinah.(2009).*The Oxford Companion to English Literature, Seventh Edition*. Oxford: OUP.



11.9 ANSWERS TO CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

Ans to Q No 1: Eric Arthur Blair.

Ans to Q No 2: Orwell's personal experiences in the colonies left him disillusioned about the aims of the British Empire. Consequently, he resigned to escape from the trap of Imperialism and as a protest against the domination of man over man.

Ans to Q No 3: *Animal Farm* (1945) and *Nineteen Eighty Four* (1949).

Ans to Q No 4: The essay "Politics and the English Language" was published in *The Horizon* in the year 1946.

Ans to Q No 5: George Orwell points out that the chief hurdle that stands on the way of expressing oneself clearly is insincerity on the part of the concerned speaker or writer. When a person's real aims and motives are different from the ones that he declare publicly, he will

instinctively make use of long words and outdated idioms to justify his cause.

Ans to Q No 6: Dying metaphors, operators of false limbs, pretentious diction and meaningless words.

Ans to Q No 7: One should never use a metaphor, simile or any other figure of speech that one is used to seeing in print. Orwell argues that outdated metaphors like *Achilles' heel*, *melting pot, Hotbed*, etc. lessen the original meaning of these phrases since the person using these phrases in the contemporary time is hardly familiar with the true meaning of those sentences and why they were originally used. Consequently, people rely on imitating phrases without understanding the real meaning of the words they use.

Ans to Q No 8: The major theme that we find in the essay is the theme of politics and its use of language as a tool of manipulation and the use of correct English.

Ans to Q No 9: Writing in a clear and lucid style, Orwell avoids any use of ornamental words, or metaphors and similes that would not be understood by the readers. The essay, in fact, is a practical example illustrating how the English language could be used in an eloquent and coherent style without any special literary devices. He wrote with a personal and subjective tone, enlightening the readers about the gradual downfall of the English language because of its misuse.



11.10 MODEL QUESTIONS

Q1: Describe the life and works of George Orwell.

Q2: Why is the essay "Politics and the English Language" significant?

Q3: What are the rules laid down by Orwell for a writer and speaker of English language?

Q4: Why, according to Orwell, should the socio-political writers write effectively?

Q5: Give a summary of the essay "Politics and the English Language".

Q6: Mention the various examples given by Orwell to clarify his point.

Q7: Analyse the style of George Orwell from your reading of the essay "Politics and the English Language".

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