

## New Words, George Orwell

At present the formation of new words is a slow process (I have read somewhere that English gains about six and losses about four words a year) and no new words are deliberately coined except as names for material objects. Abstract words are never coined at all, though old words (e. g. 'condition'. 'reflex', etc.) are sometimes twisted into new meanings for scientific purposes. What I am going to suggest here is that it would be quite feasible to invent a vocabulary, perhaps amounting to several thousands of words, which would deal with parts of our experience now practically unmeanable to language. There are several objections to the idea, and I will deal with these as they arise. The first step is to indicate the kind of purpose for which new words are needed.

Everyone who thinks at all has noticed that our language is practically useless for describing anything that goes on inside the brain. This is so generally recognized that writers of high skill (e. g. Trollope and Mark Twain) will start their autobiographies by saying that they do not intend to describe their inner life, because it is of its nature indescribable. So soon as we are dealing with anything that is not concrete or visible (and even there to a great extent – look at the difficulty of describing anyone's appearance) we find that words are no like to the reality than chessmen to living beings. To take an obvious case which will not raise side-issues, consider a dream. How do you describe a dream? Clearly you never describe it, because no words that convey the atmosphere of dreams exist in our language.

Of course, you can give a crude approximation of some of the facts in a dream. You can say 'I dreamed that I was walking down Regent Street with a porcupine wearing a bowler hat' etc., but this is no real description of the dream. And even if a psychologist interprets your dream in terms of 'symbols', he is still going largely by guesswork; for the real quality of the dream, the quality that gave the porcupine its sole significance, is outside the world of words. In fact, describing a dream is like translating a poem into the language of one of Bohn's cribs; it is a paraphrase which is meaningless unless one knows the original.

I chose dreams as an instance that would not be disputed, but if were only dreams that were indescribable, the matter might not be worth bothering about. But, as has been pointed out over and over again, the waking mind is not so different from the dreaming mind as it appears – or as we like to pretend that it appears. It is true that most of our waking thoughts are reasonable' – that is, there exists in our minds a kind of chessboard upon which thoughts move logically and verbally; we use this part of our minds for any straightforward intellectual problem, and we get into the habit of thinking (i.e. thinking in our chessboard moments) that it is the whole of the mind. But obviously it is not the whole. The disordered, un-verbal world belonging to dreams is never quite absent from our minds, and if any calculation were possible I dare say it would be found that quite half the volume of our waking thoughts were of this order. Certainly the dream-thoughts take a hand even when we are trying to think verbally, they influence the verbal thoughts, and it is largely they that make our inner life valuable. Examine your thought at any casual moment. The main movement in it will be a stream of nameless things – so nameless that one hardly knows whether to call them thoughts, images or feelings. In the first place there are the objects you see and the sounds you hear, which are in themselves describable in words, but which as soon as they enter your mind become something quite different and totally indescribable(1).

And besides this there is the dream-life which your mind unceasingly creates for itself – and though most of this is trivial and soon forgotten, it contains things which are beautiful, funny, etc. beyond anything that ever gets into word. In a way this un-verbal part of your mind is even the most important part for it is the source of nearly all motives. All likes and dislikes, all aesthetic feeling, all notions of right and wrong (aesthetic and moral considerations are in any case inextricable) spring from feelings which are generally admitted to be subtler than words. When you are asked 'Why do you do, or not do, so and so?' you are invariably aware that your real reason will not go into words, even when you have no wish to conceal it; consequently you rationalize your conduct, more or less dishonestly. I don't know whether everyone would admit this, and it is a fact that some people seem unaware of being influenced by their inner life, or even of having any inner. I notice that many people never laugh when they are alone and I suppose that if a man doesn't laugh when he is alone his inner life must be relatively barren. Still, every at all individual man has an inner life, and is aware of the practical impossibility of understanding others or being understood – in general, of the star-like isolation in which human beings live. Nearly all literature is an attempt to escape from this isolation by round – about means the direct means (words in their primary meanings) being almost useless.

'Imaginative' writing is as it were a flank-attack upon positions that are impregnable from the front. A writer attempting anything that is not coldly 'intellectual' can do very little with words in their primary meanings. He gets his effect, if at all, by using words in a tricky roundabout way, relying on their cadences and so forth, as in speech he would rely upon tone and gesture. In the case of poetry this is too well known to be worth arguing about. No one with the smallest understanding of poetry supposed that

The mortal moon bath her eclipse endured,  
And the sad augurs mock their own presage

really means what the words 'mean' in their dictionary-sense. (The couplet is said to refer to Queen Elizabeth having got over her grand climacteric safely.) The dictionary-meaning has, as nearly always, something to do with the real meaning, but not more than the 'anecdote' of a picture has to do with its design. And it is the same with prose, mutatis mutandis. Consider a novel, even a novel which has ostensibly nothing to do with the inner life – what is called a 'straight story'. Consider Manon Lescaut. Why does the author invent this long rigmarole about an unfaithful girl and a runaway abbé? Because he has a certain feeling, vision, whatever you like to call it, and knows, possibly after experiment, that it is no use trying to convey this vision by describing it as one would describe a crayfish for a book of zoology. But by not describing it, by inventing something else (in this case a picaresque novel: in another age he would choose another form) he can convey it, or part of it.

The art of writing is in fact largely the perversion of words, and I would even say that the less obvious this perversion is, the more thoroughly it has been done. For a writer who seems to twist words out of their meanings (e. g. Gerard Manley Hopkins) is really, if one looks closely, making a desperate attempt to use them straightforwardly. Whereas a writer who seems to have no tricks whatever, for instance the old ballad writers, is making an especially subtle flank-attack, though, in the case of the ballad writers, this is no doubt unconscious. Of

course one hears a lot of cant to the effect that all good art is 'objective' and every true artist keeps his inner life to himself. But the people who say this do not mean it. All they mean is that they want the inner life to be expressed by an exceptionally roundabout method, as in the ballad or the 'straight story'.

The weakness of the roundabout method, apart from its difficulty, is that it usually fails. For anyone who is not a considerable artist (possibly for them too) the lumpishness of words results in constant falsification. Is there anyone who has ever written so much as a love letter in which he felt that he had said exactly what he intended? A writer falsifies himself both intentionally and unintentionally. Intentionally, because the accidental qualities of words constantly tempt and frighten him away from his true meaning. He gets an idea, begins trying to express it, and then in the frightful mess of words that generally results, a pattern begins to form itself more or less accidentally.

It is not by any means the pattern he wants, but it is at any rate not vulgar or disagreeable; it is 'good art'. He takes it, because 'good art' is a more or less mysterious gift from heaven, and it seems a pity to waste it when it presents itself. Is not anyone with any degree of mental honesty conscious of telling lies all day long, both in talking and writing, simply because lies will fall into artistic shape when truth will not? Yet if word represented meaning as fully and accurately as height multiplied by base represents the area of a parallelogram, at least the necessity for lying would never exist. And in the mind of reader or hearer there are further falsifications, because, words not being a direct channel of thought, he constantly sees meanings which are not there. A good illustration of this is our supposed appreciation of foreign poetry.

We know from the *Vie Amoureuse du Docteur Watson* stuff of foreign critics, that true understanding of foreign literature is almost impossible; yet quite ignorant people profess to get, do get, vast pleasure out of poetry in foreign and even dead languages. Clearly the pleasure they derive may come from something the writer never intended, possibly from something that would make him squirm in his grave if he knew it was attributed to him. I say to myself *Vixi puellis nuper idoneus*, and I repeat this over and over for five minutes for the beauty of the word *idoneus*. Yet, considering the gulf of time and culture, and my ignorance of Latin, and the fact that no one even knows how Latin was pronounced, is it possible that the effect I am enjoying is the effect Horace was trying for? It is as though I were in ecstasies over the beauty of a picture, and all because of some splashes of paint which had accidentally got on to the canvas two hundred years after it was painted. Notice, I am not saying that art would necessarily improve if words conveyed meaning more reliably. For all I know art thrives on the crudeness and vagueness of language. I am only criticizing words in their supposed function as vehicles of thought. And it seems to me that from the point of view of exactitude and expressiveness our language has remained in the Stone Age.

The solution I suggest is to invent new words as deliberately as we would invent new parts for a motor-car engine. Suppose that a vocabulary existed which would accurately express the life of the mind, or a great part of it. Suppose that there need be no stultifying feeling that life is inexpressible, no jiggery-pokery with artistic tricks; expressing one's meaning simply (being) a matter of taking the right words and putting them in place, like working out an equation in algebra. I think the advantages of this would be obvious. It is less obvious, though, than

to sit down and deliberately coin words in a common-sense proceeding. Before indicating a way in which satisfactory words might be coined, I had better deal with the objections which are bound to arise.

If you say to any thinking person 'Let us form a society for the invention of new and subtler words', he will first of all object that it is the idea of a crank, and then probably say that our present words, properly handled, will meet all difficulties. (This last, of course, is only a theoretical objection. In practice everyone recognizes the inadequacy of language — consider such expressions as 'Words fail', 'It wasn't what he said, it was the way he said it', etc.) but finally he will give you an answer something like this: 'Things cannot be done in that pedantic way. Languages can only grow slowly, like flowers; you can't patch them up like pieces of machinery. Any made-up language must be characterless and lifeless — look at Esperanto, etc. The whole meaning of a word is in its slowly-acquired associations', etc.

In the first place, this argument, like most of the arguments produced when one suggests changing anything, is a long-winded way of saying that what is must be. Hitherto we have never set ourselves to the deliberate creation of words, and all living languages have grown slowly and haphazard; therefore language cannot grow otherwise. At present, when we want to say anything above the level of a geometrical definition, we are obliged to do conjuring trick with sounds, associations, etc.; therefore this necessity is inherent in the nature of words. The non sequitur is obvious. And notice that when I suggest abstract words I am only suggesting an extension of our present practice. For we do now coin concrete words. Airplanes and bicycles are invented, and we invent names for them, which is the natural thing to do. It is only a step to coining names for the now unnamed things that exist in the mind. You say to me 'Why do you dislike Mr Smith?' and I say 'Because he is a liar, coward, etc.', and I am almost certainly giving the wrong reason.

In my own mind the answer runs 'Because he is a — kind of man', — standing for something which I understand, and you would understand if I could tell it you. Why not find a name for —? The only difficulty is to agree about what we are naming. But long before this difficulty raised, the reading, thinking type of man will have recoiled from such as ideas as the invention of words. He will produce argument like the one I indicated above, or others of a more or less sneering, question-begging kind. In reality all these arguments are humbug. The recoil comes from a deep unreasoned instinct, superstitious in origin. It is the feeling that any direct rational approach to one's difficulties, any attempt to solve the problems of life as one would solve an equation, can lead nowhere — more, is definitely unsafe. One can see this idea expressed everywhere in a roundabout way. All the bosh that is talked about our national genius for 'muddling through', and all the squashy godless mysticism that is urged against any hardness and soundness of intellect, mean au fond that it is safer not to think. This feeling starts, I am certain, in the common belief of children that the air is full of avenging demons waiting to punish presumption(2).

In adults the belief survives as a fear of too rational thinking. I the Lord thy God am a jealous God, pride comes before a fall, etc. — and the most dangerous pride is the false pride of the intellect. David was punished because he numbered the people — i.e. because he used his intellect scientifically. Thus such an idea as, for instance, eugenics, apart from its possible effects upon the health of the race, family life, etc., is felt to be in itself blasphemous. Similarly any attack on such a fundamental thing as language, an attack as it were on

the very structure of our own minds, is blasphemy and therefore dangerous. To reform language is practically an interference with the work of God — though I don't say that anyone would put it quite in these words. This objection is important, because it would prevent most people from even considering such an idea as the reform of language. And of course the idea is useless unless undertaken by large numbers. For one man, or a clique, to try and make up a language, as I believe James Joyce is now doing, is as absurd as one man trying to play football alone. What is wanted is several thousands of gifted but normal people who would give themselves to word-invention as seriously as people now give themselves to Shakespearean research. Given these, I believe we could work wonders with language.

Now as to the means. One sees an instance of the successful invention of words, though crude and on small scale, among the members of large families. All large families have two or three words peculiar to themselves — words which they have made up and which convey subtilized, non-dictionary meanings. They say 'Mr Smith is a — kind of man'. Using some home-made word, and the others understand perfectly; here then, within the limits of the family, exists an adjective filling one of the many gaps left by the dictionary. What makes it possible for the family to invent these words is the basis of their common experience. Without common experience, of course, no word can mean anything. If you say to me 'What does bergamot smell like?' I say 'Something like verbena'. And so long as you know the smell of verbena you are somewhere near understanding me.

The method of inventing words, therefore, is the method of analogy based on unmistakable common knowledge; one must have standards that can be referred to without any chance of misunderstanding, as one can refer to a physical thing like the smell of verbena. In effect it must come down to giving words a physical (probably visible) existence. Merely talking about definitions is futile; one can see this whenever it is attempted to define one of the words used by literary critics (e. g. 'sentimental' (3) 'vulgar', 'morbid', etc.). All meaningless — or rather, having a different meaning for everyone who uses them. What is needed is to show a meaning in some unmistakable form, and then, when various people have identified it in their own minds and recognized it as worth naming, to give it a name. The question is simply of finding a way in which one can give thought an objective existence.

The thing that suggests itself immediately is the cinematograph. Everyone must have noticed the extraordinary powers that are latent in the film — the powers of distortion, of fantasy, in general of escaping the restrictions of the physical world. I suppose it is only from commercial necessity that the film has been used chiefly for silly imitations of stage plays, instead of concentrating as it ought on things that are beyond the stage. Properly used, the film is the one possible medium for conveying mental processes. A dream, for instance, as I said above, is totally indescribable in words, but it can quite well be represented on the screen. Years ago I saw a film of Douglas Fairbanks', part of which was a representation of a dream. Most of it, of course, was silly joking about the dream where you have no clothes on in public, but for a few minutes it really was like a dream, in a manner that would have been impossible in words, or even in a picture, or, I imagine, in music. I have seen the same kind of thing by flashes in other films. For instance in Dr Caligari — a film, however, which was for the most part merely silly, the fantastic element being exploited for its own sake and not to convey any definite meaning.

If one thinks of it there is very little in the mind that could not somehow be represented by the strange distorting powers of the film. A millionaire with a private cinematograph, all the necessary props and a troupe of intelligent actors could, if he wished, make practically all of his inner life known. He could explain the real reasons of his actions instead of telling rationalized lies, point out the things an ordinary man has to keep locked up because there are no words to express them. In general, he could make other people understand him. Of course, it is not desirable that any one man, short of a genius, should make a show of his inner life. What is wanted is to discover the now nameless feelings that men have in common. All the powerful motives which will not go into words and which are a cause of constant lying and misunderstanding, could be tracked down, given visible form, agreed upon, and named. I am sure that the film, with its almost limitless powers of representation, could accomplish this in the hands of the right investigators, though putting thoughts into visible shape would not always be easy - in fact, at first it might be as difficult as any other art.

A note on the actual form new words ought to take. Suppose that several thousands of people with the necessary time, talents and money undertook to make additions to language; suppose that they managed to agree upon a number of new and necessary words; they would still have to guard against producing a mere Volapuk which would drop out of use as soon as it was invented. It seems to me probable that a word, even a not yet existing word, has as it were a natural form - or rather, various natural forms in various languages. If languages were truly expressive there would be no need to play upon the sounds of words as we do now, but I suppose there must always be some correlation between the sound of a word and its meaning. An accepted (I believe) and plausible theory of the origin of language is this. Primitive man, before he had words, would naturally rely upon gesture, and like any other animal he would cry out at the moment of gesticulating, in order to attract attention. Now one instinctively makes the gesture that is appropriate to one's meaning, and all parts of the body follow suit including the tongue. Hence, certain tongue-movements - i.e. certain sounds - would come to be associated with certain meanings.

In poetry one can point to words which, apart from their direct meanings, regularly convey certain ideas by their sound. Thus: 'Deeper than did ever plummet sound' (Shakespeare - more than once I think). 'Past the plunge of plummet' (A. E. Housman). 'the unplumbed, salt, estranging sea' (Matthew Arnold), etc. Clearly, apart from direct meanings, the sound plum- or plun- has something to do with bottomless oceans. Therefore in forming new words one would have to pay attention to appropriateness of sound as well as exactitude of meaning. It would not do, as at present, to clip a new word of any real novelty by making it out of old ones, but it also would not do to make it out of a mere arbitrary collection of letters. One would have to determine the natural form of the word. Like agreeing upon the actual meanings of the words, this would need the cooperation of a large number of people.

I have written all this down hastily, and when I read through it I see that there are weak patches in my argument and much of it is commonplace. To most people in any case the whole idea of reforming language would seem either dilettantish or crankish. Yet it is worth considering what utter incomprehension exists between human beings - at least between those who are not deeply intimate. At present, as Samuel Butler said, the best art (i.e. the most perfect thought-transference) must be 'lived' from one person to another. It need not be so if our language were more adequate. It is curious that when our knowledge, the complication of our

lives and therefore (I think it must follow) our minds, develop so fast, language, the chief means of communication, should scarcely stir. For this reason I think that the idea of the deliberate invention of words is at least worth thinking over.

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(1) 'The mind, that ocean where each kind Doth straight its own resemblance find, Yet it creates, transcending these, Far other worlds and other seas,' etc.

(2) The idea is that the demons will come down on you for being too self-confident. Thus children believe that if you hook a fish and say 'Got him' before he is landed, he will escape; that if you put your pads on before it is your turn to bat you will be out first ball, etc. Such beliefs often survive in adults. Adults are only less superstitious than children in proportion as they have more power over their environment. In predicaments where everyone is powerless (e. g. war, gambling) everyone is superstitious. [back]

(3) I once began making a list of writers whom the critics called 'sentimental'. In the end it included nearly every English writer. The word is in fact a meaningless symbol of hatred, like the bronze tripods in Homer which were given to guest as a symbol of friendship.

THE END