Clinton, Trump, and the Politics of the English Language

Ben J. Reinhard

Worrying about words may well seem like a frivolous luxury at this stage in the history of the Republic. We have, after all, recently witnessed the end of the most divisive election season in recent memory, waged between two of the most polarizing candidates in the history of the presidency. Election-night coverage and voting patterns revealed a battle between two sharply divided, mutually suspicious Americas, and however relieved one might be about the results of the election, precisely how the conflict will resolve itself is still far from clear. In the meantime, the future of religious liberty, the right to life, and America's place on the world stage all hang in the balance. Given this state of affairs, wrangling about language seems an irrelevant distraction, or even positively counterproductive—the rough equivalent of insisting on Queensbury rules in a street fight or applying makeup to a triage patient.

If such a concern is a luxury, however, it did not seem so to the great British writers of the first half of the twentieth century. On the contrary, faced with a similar civilizational crisis, men like G. K. Chesterton, T. S. Eliot, and C. S. Lewis worried about words a great deal. Indeed, the concern for the degradation

About the Author

Ben J. Reinhard, Ph.D., is assistant professor of English language and literature at Christendom College. A scholar of medieval English literature, he earned his B.A. from Purdue University and his doctorate from the University of Notre Dame, where his dissertation explored works in Old English by the medieval Anglo-Saxon bishop Wulfstan of York. Reinhard's publications can be found in scholarly journals such as the Old English Newsletter, English Studies, and Religion and Literature (forthcoming), and he has also delivered numerous scholarly conference papers and public lectures on a variety of literary topics. He and his family live in Front Royal, Va.
of the English language—and the simultaneous degradation of English social order—is a recurring theme, running through and uniting many of their writings.

The idea is expressed first, and perhaps most clearly, in the writings of G. K. Chesterton. In Orthodoxy, Chesterton argues that men use long words to make up for short thoughts; the impressive words save mental labor for those “too tired or too indolent to think for themselves.” The long scientific word—from Chesterton’s example, “degeneration” as opposed to “damn”—gives a sentence the flavor of impartiality and saves both speaker and audience from having to grapple with the harsh realities under discussion. By the same token, long words can be used to impress, overawe, and cow one’s rhetorical victims: a sentence that sounds lofty enough is not likely to be questioned. Chesterton’s response to the problem is incarnated in Michael Moon, the protagonist of his Manalive. Faced with an endless barrage of inflated scientific rhetoric, Moon finally revolts, refusing “to be bullied with long words instead of short reasons.”

Where Chesterton led, others soon followed. Evelyn Waugh reacted against the drab tyranny of Basic English; the result was (in part) the elegant style of Brideshead Revisited. J. R. R. Tolkien adopted a similar style in his Lord of the Rings, casting his magnum opus in deliberately archaic prose. His reasoning was simple. As he explains in his Letters, modern speech is incapable of adequately expressing the heroic thought of days gone by; chivalric speech and chivalric thought go together. The reverse is also true. The language of Tolkien’s orcs is nasty, brutish, and abusive; the language of Saruman is manipulative and deceptive—what he calls “fair distribution” is nothing other than theft.

C. S. Lewis likewise worried about the use of language to deceive and the simultaneous degeneration of language and morals. His Studies in Words and Abolition of Man detail his concerns; his Space Trilogy, in which the villains customarily speak in scientific and political jargon to conceal their crimes, brings them to life. So for instance, Mark Studdock, the amoral sociologist in That Hideous Strength, has “a great reluctance, in his work, ever to use such words as ‘man’ or ‘woman,’” preferring to write about “‘vocational groups,’ ‘elements,’ ‘classes,’ and ‘populations.’” He is shocked when he is forced to confront the actual people affected by his theories: the concrete realities had been obscured by the abstract words. Finally, the anxiety about speech worked its way into poetry as well. The whole mission of Chesterton and company is summed up neatly in Eliot’s “Little Gidding”:

[O]ur concern was speech, and speech impelled us
To purify the dialect of the tribe
And urge the mind to aftersight and foresight.

The purification of speech is the purification of thought; without it, any real reflection—aftersight or foresight—is impossible.

The most comprehensive and certainly the most celebrated
critique of the decay of English comes from an unlikely source: George Orwell’s “Politics and the English Language.” As a socialist, Orwell was hostile to the conservatism of the others; for all this, the argument of his essay closely mirrors what we see in Eliot, Lewis, and (especially) Chesterton. He warns that “thought corrupts language” but “language can also corrupt thought.” Unless a speaker is cautious, Orwell warns, language itself will force him to accept the orthodoxy of his political party. Stock political phrases “will construct your sentences for you—even think your thoughts for you, to a certain extent—and at need they will perform the important service of partially concealing your meaning even from yourself.” Like Chesterton, Orwell notes that political language is “largely the defence of the indefensible,” employed to whitewash ugly realities; it is “designed to make lies sound truthful and murder respectable, and to give an appearance of solidity to pure wind.”

The theory of Orwell’s “Politics” is mirrored almost exactly in his dystopian novel 1984, in which Ingsoc, the English socialist dictatorship, holds absolute control over every aspect of life, including speech. One of Big Brother’s most important means for maintaining its control is the debasement of the English language through the creation of “Newspeak”—effected through the elimination of some dangerous words, the weakening of others, and the creation of a flat, inflexible vocabulary. The reason for this linguistic mutilation is complicated but critically important. When a word loses its meaning or vanishes altogether, the concept it represents vanishes too. With sufficient linguistic debasement, as Orwell explains, “a heretical thought—that is, a thought diverging from the principles of Ingsoc—should be literally unthinkable.” So, for instance, the word free was redefined in Newspeak to mean merely lacking an undesirable trait, as in “This field is free from weeds.” The older meaning—political or economic freedom—is gone, and as a result, the statement I am a free man is meaningless. Meaningless, and therefore incapable of threatening the totalitarian dictatorship.

Turning from theory to practice, it is not difficult to see Orwell’s principles played out on the national stage today. Words like freedom, choice, and love—and, in some uses, even man and woman—have lost their meaning or collapsed under the weight of many conflicting meanings; Newspeak is alive and well. Orwell’s fictional Ministry of Love was founded on self-contradictory slogans: “WAR IS PEACE. FREEDOM IS SLAVERY. IGNORANCE IS STRENGTH.” The modern university is not far behind: in most cases a commitment to diversity demands increasing ideological conformity; tolerance seems to imply instead a rigidly narrow intolerance. The corruption has extended even to words lacking any obvious political meaning. Antiquated, as used in contemporary political discourse, seems to mean something like “originating in or characteristic of a year before
2011, and therefore outdated and reprehensible.” The term has become a precise real-world equivalent to the Orwellian *oldthink*.

The use of political language to confuse, deceive, and whitewash—to “defend the indefensible,” in Orwell’s terms—is, however, most obvious in the abortion debates. In language as in life, *baby* is the first victim: the word is uncomfortably concrete, real, and human. No one would kill a baby—and thus *fetus* and *pregnancy* become the preferred terms. In many instances, defenders of abortion avoid using the word *abortion* at all; even the old standby “terminating a pregnancy” has increasingly fallen out of favor. The new watchword is *health*—as in “critical health services” or “reproductive health care” or “personal health decisions.”

With the question of abortion, we return to the main point of this essay: the 2016 presidential campaign. Mrs. Clinton is a typical politician if ever there was one, and her campaign traded extensively in Orwellian rhetoric—indeed, the three euphemisms for *abortion* in the last paragraph were drawn from one of her statements on the subject. She is not, of course, the only politician to use such language: it has been the dominant argot of the established parties of the last century or so. Despite the social and political success of the parties of “long words,” however, their victory has been less than complete. The reason is simple. As Chesterton’s Michael Moon noted, the condescension of the cognoscenti is a form of bullying, and people resent bullying.

All of this explains, in part, the initial rise and improbable ultimate success of Donald Trump: put simply, he refused to observe the established rules of American political discourse. This rhetorical style set him apart from the rest of the Republican field, solidified his base of support, and carried him to victory in both the primaries and the general election. His oft-lampooned claim to have “the best words” is a case in point. Speaking on the Obama administration’s handling of the Syrian crisis, Mr. Trump noted that he once used standard, polite words to describe the administration, but no more. “I used to call them incompetent,” he said. “Now I just call them stupid.” The point is well taken: even for an Ivy League–educated businessman, and even when longer and more impressive words (“incompetent”) are available, sometimes “there is no better word than stupid.”

There is, of course, a rhetorical strategy at work here. *Ars est celare artem.* The highest art, according to the old formula, is to conceal one’s art. This is especially true in the art of rhetoric, as audiences conscious of a speaker’s artfulness may feel manipulated and respond accordingly. Shakespeare’s Antony is the archetype for this kind of rhetoric, and his claim to be “no orator, as Brutus is; / but as you know me all, a plain, blunt man” is one of the oldest rhetorical tricks in
the book. It is especially effective in this country, as the American love of democracy and equality has always tended toward home-spun populism. Characters as diverse as Davy Crockett, Abraham Lincoln, and George W. Bush have recognized this fact and profited from it; Mr. Trump is merely the latest—and perhaps the most emphatic—of American plain-speakers. To verify Mr. Trump’s success in this regard, one need only consider the creed of his earliest supporters: “He tells it like it is.”

And so, whatever else the 2016 campaign was, it was a clash between two diametrically opposed styles: polished, professional, and establishment on the one hand; raw, amateur, and populist on the other. Nowhere was the stylistic clash more obvious and dramatic than in the third and final presidential debate. When asked about abortion—and, in particular, partial-birth abortion—Mrs. Clinton resorted immediately to the kind of political rhetoric that has become standard for both parties. She promised to “defend women’s rights to make their own healthcare decisions” and spoke of the “heartbreaking, painful decisions” involved in late-term abortions—decisions in which the U.S. government, of course, has no place. Mr. Trump’s response highlighted his own rhetorical strategy: “If you go by what Hillary is saying, in the ninth month, you can take the baby and rip the baby out of the womb of the mother.”

The contrast could not be more clear. On the one hand, we have Mrs. Clinton’s appeal to “healthcare decisions”—as fine a representative of Orwell’s “sheer cloudy vagueness” as could be hoped for. On the other hand, we have Mr. Trump’s concrete words—baby, ninth month, mother, womb, and especially rip. As jarring as the rhetorical contrast was, however, perhaps the most instructive aspect of the exchange was Mrs. Clinton’s response. Faced with a more or less accurate description of a late-term abortion, she made no real attempt to defend her argument. She did not assert that, sometimes, personal freedom allows for the dismemberment of viable babies. Instead, Mrs. Clinton attacked the words themselves: “using that kind of scare rhetoric,” she noted, “is just terribly unfortunate.”

The contrast between Mr. Trump and the political establishment continued after the election as well. With the death of Fidel Castro, Canadian Prime Minister Justin Trudeau released a statement praising

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the “legendary revolutionary and orator” who, though a “controversial figure” demonstrated “tremendous dedication and love for the Cuban people.” While less overtly laudatory, the Obama administration likewise adopted a cautiously indifferent tone: Castro was a “singular figure” who made an “enormous impact . . . on the people and the world around him.” No one could deny that Castro was singular, and the millions who fled his regime could certainly attest to its impact—but it is hard not to feel that something is missing here. What impact did Castro have? How precisely did he “alter the course of individual lives, families, and of the Cuban nation”? Unlike his predecessor, Mr. Trump was happy
to answer those questions. His statement called Castro a “brutal dictator” whose legacy “is one of firing squads, theft, unimaginable suffering, poverty and the denial of fundamental human rights.”

Up to this point, Mr. Trump seems like a hero for honest, direct speech, and in many ways, he has been. But the battle to “purify the dialect of the tribe” does not end with Mr. Trump’s inauguration. Indeed, the 2016 election raises new concerns. In the first place, it is only fair to note that Mr. Trump’s campaign relied heavily on the vague, emotive slogans and phrases that Orwell deplored so intensely. The call to “make America great again” could mean any number of things; so too could Mr. Trump’s victory-speech promise to “bind the wounds of division” afflicting the nation. It is not that either phrase is inept or inelegant: the first channels the spirit (and, indeed, the slogan) of Reagan’s 1980 presidential campaign, while the second employs the language of the Psalter and the parable of the Good Samaritan. But it is difficult to say just what either phrase actually means or what concrete actions they would entail.

More concerns arise when we look more closely at some of Mr. Trump’s statements, which test the limits of the theories of Orwell and Chesterton. Orwell had noted that “the great enemy of clear language is insincerity,” and that the deceiver “turns instinctively to long words and exhausted idioms.” As a consequence, both Chesterton and Orwell challenged their readers to express complex thoughts using words of only one syllable. In his most famous remarks on immigration, Mr. Trump very nearly succeeds: “I will build a great, great wall on our southern border, and I will make Mexico pay for that wall.” The sentence contains only three words of more than one syllable; none of them could be replaced by a simpler or shorter equivalent. It is certainly more direct, clear, and comprehensible than any available alternative in modern political speech, whether that alternative be “a path to citizenship” or “amnesty,” “securing the border” or “comprehensive immigration reform.”

But is it true? Pace Orwell and Chesterton, simplicity in style may not equal sincerity; plain speech is only valuable when matched with equally plain honesty. The idea that Mexico would willingly pay for a “great, great wall” seems ludicrous if taken seriously, and Mr. Trump is canny enough to know this. But what if the claim was never meant to be taken literally? Mr. Trump’s autobiographical Art of the Deal recommends insincerity to aspiring deal-makers: they are to use “bravado” and “truthful hyperbole” to impress their audience, and not shy away from being “a little outrageous” in their presentation of their ideas.1 Given Mr. Trump’s commitment to “truthful hyperbole”—an exaggeration that reveals an underlying truth—the pledge to build a wall may be nothing more than a promise to be “tough on immigration.” If this is the case, however, (and more recent statements from Mr. Trump and his advisers suggests that it is) it is not clear that Mr. Trump’s blunt,
bold speech is any less vogue than standard political rhetoric.

More serious problems emerge when we turn to some of Mr. Trump’s remarks on terrorism. As noted above, Chesterton, Orwell, and company assumed that certain claims were so reprehensible as to be unseparable, and that men invented long words to conceal their true purposes from their followers and even themselves. But when discussing America’s struggle against terrorists in the Middle East, Mr. Trump openly suggested that the United States government should engage in war crimes: it should be willing “to take out their families.” This is certainly a more honest and literal statement than the Obama administration’s promise to “degrade” ISIS—but if it is not just another “truthful hyperbole,” it is horrifying: a bald-faced assertion of the indefensible, with no attempt at defense or justification. More alarming still, while Mr. Trump’s detractors were quick to pounce on his words, many of his supporters gave the remark a pass, accepting either that their candidate exaggerates or that it is acceptable to murder children to punish their parents. The old rhetorical demons have been chased out, and for this we should be thankful—but what will take their place?

Despite all this, there are many reasons for hope. Confucius believed that the first step toward justice is the rectification of names—that is, that the first step toward justice is to call things by their proper names. Language is fluid, and nature abhors a vacuum. Yes, the old patterns of speech and old rhetorical rules have been cleared out, for now. But unless something else takes their place, it is only a matter of time before they come rushing back in.

Providing that something else will be one of the defining challenges for us during the Trump presidency. We must speak honestly about the Good, the True, and the Beautiful. Doing so will require private and public virtues: honest self-examination to ensure that we speak truly, and the courage to criticize our own allies, parties, and patrons when they do not. The field has been cleared of weeds. It is our job now to keep it clean, plant good crop, and—by the grace of God—bring the harvest in.

Despite all this, there are many reasons for hope. Confucius believed that the first step toward justice is the rectification of names—that is, calling things by their proper names and ensuring that they fulfill their proper roles. At the dawn of 2017, we have an unprecedented chance to do just that. The candidacy of Mr. Trump was fueled by his rebellion against modern political rhetoric; his election to the presidency vindicated the critique. But it is one thing to destroy a corrupt system—it is quite another to build up a new one in its place.

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ENDNOTES


2. Newt Gingrich—one of Mr. Trump’s chief advisors—has suggested that Mr. Trump’s insistence that Mexico pay for the wall was intended as “a great campaign device” not to be taken literally. “Green the Safari” said some of Mr. Trump’s campaign advisors in after-Donald Trump campaign since August, it seems likely that Mr. Gingrich is correct.
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