Corruption of Language in Print Media: Revisiting Orwell's Framework in the Philippine Context

Vilma C. Grengia

Abstract: *This research utilizes George Orwell's theory of language corruption to investigate linguistic misuse in Philippine editorial and opinion pages. Based on Orwell's four types—dying metaphors, verbal false limbs, pretentious diction, and empty words—the research considers thirty articles in July 2010 in three prominent print media newspapers: The Philippine Daily Inquirer, The Philippine Star, and The Philippine Free Press. Particular focus is given to the use of metaphor, which is seen to have a strong influence on clarity and message transmission. The research also looks at the wider implications of such language use, examining its possible link to social problems like misinformation and public disengagement. Findings are that some columnists use stylistic excesses and imprecise expression, supporting Orwell's criticism of contemporary prose. These results indicate not only that media language manipulation warps meaning, but also deeper social trends. This study has shown that some writers of editorial and opinion articles showed corrupting the English language from the lens of Orwell. These writers who load their articles with fancy and who make useless circumlocutions at the cost of leaving their message vague. The research calls for increased linguistic responsibility in public communication and makes clear the continuing relevance of Orwell's observations.*

Keywords: *linguistic analysis, sociolinguistics, corpus study, language corruption, print media*

Introduction

Language, as the principal vehicle of human communication, holds the power not only to reflect but also to shape thought and social reality (Gee, 2018; Fairclough, 2015). However, in recent decades, scholars have expressed growing concern over the degradation of the English language, particularly in public discourse and mass media (Crystal, 2019; Trask, 2020). Vague expressions, inflated jargon, and imprecise metaphors have permeated print journalism, creating a linguistic climate where clarity and truth often take a backseat to rhetorical flair or ideological manipulation (Allan & Fowler, 2022). These trends are not entirely new. As early as 1946, George Orwell, in his influential essay *Politics and the English Language*, warned that the deterioration of language reflects and contributes to the decadence of civilization. He identified patterns of linguistic decay, such as dying metaphors, pretentious diction, meaningless words, and verbal false limbs, all of which he argued served to obscure meaning and mislead readers (Orwell, 1946/2020).

Although Orwell's critique was grounded in the context of mid-20th-century political writing, the same issues persist—arguably in more complex forms—within contemporary editorial and opinion journalism (Davies, 2021; McIntyre, 2022). Today's print media exhibits a proliferation of euphemisms and bureaucratic phrases—what some scholars call "semantic obfuscation"—that distort meaning under the guise of neutrality (Brennen & Howard, 2021; Chomsky, 2023). Terms like "suboptimal outcome" (to mean a death in hospital settings) or "disposable mucus recovery unit" (a tissue box) serve as examples of how language can be manipulated to disguise uncomfortable truths (Leo, 2020). Despite Orwell's insights gaining renewed attention, there remains a gap in studies that systematically examine current manifestations of these linguistic abuses in local and national print media. Few studies have also explored the socio-political implications of these language patterns, or how they may contribute to societal confusion, apathy, or even mistrust in public discourse (Bhatia, 2022; Tuchman, 2019).

This study revisits Orwell's taxonomy of linguistic abuse to examine the prevalence and patterns of unclear, misleading, or vague expressions in editorial and opinion columns in contemporary print media. Specifically, it focuses on four categories identified by Orwell: dying metaphors, verbal false limbs, pretentious diction, and meaningless words. Special emphasis is placed on metaphor use, as metaphors play a crucial role in framing public understanding (Lakoff & Johnson, 2008; Charteris-Black, 2021). The analysis also explores the extent to which these linguistic features may correlate with or reflect broader social issues such as misinformation, ideological bias, or moral disengagement. In doing so, the study contributes to ongoing conversations about language ethics, media responsibility, and critical literacy (Hodges, 2023; van Dijk, 2018). Since the language of the print media both mirrors and influences societal discourse, the findings offer insights not only into journalism but also into the general state of public communication. By contextualizing Orwell's warnings within today's linguistic landscape, this research underscores the urgency of promoting clearer, more responsible, and more truthful language in media and public life.

Emmett G. Price III (2007) wrote in his journal article entitled "What's New? The Effect of Hip-Hop Culture on Everyday English", that language is a product of society and as a society changes, so does its language. He added that words such as "hood" (short for neighborhood), "crib" (as place of residence), and "whip" (meaning car) have become commonplace within everyday conversation and are frequently used in television shows and movies. In the same journal, Jean Henry (2007), in his article entitled

"Sports and Recreation Idioms in American English*",* wrote that it is often difficult for non-native speakers to learn and understand idioms.

In an article, Dan Leeth was cited as describing the landscape of the Grand Canyon as "*vast emptiness*". The author says this metaphor has lost its effect on the reader due to the fact that it is used too frequently in Modern English. The same is true to metaphors like "*his voice thunders…"* and "*…taken the theater scene by storm*" are too frequently used just because the author lacks the imagination to make one up for himself, a common problem in Modern English according to this author. (http://www.term-papers.us/ts/da/evj96.shtml).

In an article entitled "Language Abuse and Human Consciousness*",* the author mentioned that some writers use clichés and make an assumption that the reader has access to – and has exactly the same understanding or the same set of clichés as themselves. For the author, this is an act of thought reading on two counts: even if the reader does know the cliché, it is unlikely that his/her interpretation is the same: consequently, the writer and reader agree on basis of shared misunderstanding. (http://www.angelfire.com/nd/danscorpio/lang.html).

Methodology

This research utilized a qualitative content analysis method based on Orwell's (1946/2020) theory of linguistic decay, particularly the categorization of language abuses in editorial and opinion journalism. The main aim was to spot and examine occurrences of imprecise, exaggerated, or misleading language—i.e., those that belong to Orwell's four categories: dying metaphors, verbal false limbs, pretentious diction, and meaningless words.

In order to create a pertinence and representativeness corpus, there were three essential decisions made at the beginning: (1) choosing news publications, (2) choosing the period to be covered, and (3) choosing the number and nature of articles to be used. The research centered on three big print media in the Philippines: The Philippine Daily Inquirer, The Philippine Star, and The Philippine Free Press. These were chosen based on their widespread circulation, reputation for influencing public opinion, and longstanding presence in the national media landscape.

The corpus consists of no fewer than thirty opinion and editorial pieces written in July 2010, a time selected to exclude periods of national election or tragedies that could tilt language use toward strongly polemical political language. The sample contains columns written by a total of sixteen different columnists and thus offers a mix of stylistic inclinations and ideological outlooks.

Every article was read through by hand and language components drawn out according to Orwell's typology. The analytical procedure included marking and finding the words, phrases, and expressions that corresponded to the four categories:

Dying metaphors: clichés or figurative expressions that have lost the original imagery or meaning.

Verbal false limbs: redundant verb-noun formations or passive constructions used to conceal agency or inflate formality.

Pretentious diction: over-vocabulary aimed at impressing, confusing, or euphemizing but not clarifying.

Useless words: abstract or vague words with no definite meaning in context.

To improve reliability, all instances recognized were checked and cross-checked on internal consistency against operational definitions drawn from Orwell and modified by current discourse analysts like Fairclough (2015) and Charteris-Black (2021). Instances were also interpreted in context within each article and classified such that form was taken into consideration as well as communicative purpose and rhetorical effect.

Besides the categorization, the research used a simple frequency analysis to ascertain which categories of abuses were most common. Where appropriate, linkages were drawn between the identified linguistic features and the socio-political themes presented in the articles, providing an insight into the ideological or discursive purpose of the language utilized.

This approach facilitates a stylistic and critical discourse model with both quantitative observations and qualitative explanations of public media language use. Finally, the results seek to capture a snapshot of the survival of Orwellian linguistic pathologies in Philippine print journalism and to examine their possible influence on media discourse and public opinion.

Results and Discussions

Metaphors

The results reveal that most writers use varieties of metaphors in their articles - idioms, euphemisms, clichés and newly invented expressions. Consider these excerpts:

"*A thing not seen in a long time, when every congressman would <u>storm down the road</u> as though <u>the devil were on his tail</u>, cops on motorcycle parting traffic <u>like the Red Sea</u>".* (Conrado de Quiros, Philippine Daily Inquirer)

"*Why did he fly to the US rather than <u>face the music</u>? Maybe the music was <u>more jarring than punk</u> – Jun Lozada would later exemplify the fate of <u>whistleblowers</u>".* (de Quiros, Philippine Daily Inquirer)

There have been nearly a hundred metaphors found in the sample articles but the following are identified as commonly used ones.

knight in shining armor, face the music, living hell, fatten their pockets, bathe in luxury, to defend the big fish, sleep of the dead, voices of disappointments, tsunami of complains, bloodbath, wake from the sleep, U-turn, fly into a rage , blow fell the hardest, whistleblowers, hold the key to the secrets, will open doors, man of the hour, iron will, witch hunt, day in and day out, glimpse of hope, less than a world away, rule of thumb, waving her magic wand, baptism of fire, turn his face around, have learned a thing or two, storm down the road, to put a roof over peoples' heads, nature's wrath, birds and the bees, parrot lines, time and again, business as usual

The expressions above belong to the worn out or stale metaphors which according to Orwell have lost their evocative power. Orwell says the use of ready-made stale metaphors, similes and idioms makes the meaning vague especially when they are mixed in the sentence as in the case of the above examples. Some writers, according to Orwell do not pick out words for the sake of their meaning and inventing images in order to make the meaning clearer. Instead, they put together long strips of words which have already been set in order by someone else, and making the results presentable by sheer humbug. Paul Johnson, as cited by John Leo in his speech to a group of college students, said most people when they write, particularly journalists, including most professional writers, tend to slip into seeing events through the eyes of others because they inherit stale expressions and combinations of words, threadbare metaphors, clichés and literary conceits.

The purpose of journalists in writing their columns is to make known their message to the general public, after all, it is the people they are catering to. As in the case of some media writers, it seems they are more concerned about how they can present euphonious statements decorated with words so well-arranged and underneath them the clearer meaning is hidden. They dance around their subject, maybe even bending facts but still sound good. Their message is only for the elite - those who have access to – and have exactly the same understanding or the same set of expressions as themselves. The ordinary citizen who has no grip of all these superfluous phrases is deprived of a very simple privilege of knowing what's going on in his country and would need his Webster's every time he reads a paper. Does he even have the budget for a dictionary or a newspaper when all he can earn is only for his survival? This is a manifestation of social inequality.

Operators or verbal false limbs

The writers of the sample articles merely use examples of this category. Only a few operators or verbal false limbs are identified even though the examples supplied by Orwell are very familiar ones. Here are four sentences with these phrases.

Other presidents just do other things later, <u>with a view to being of use</u> to the country.

But it is as important, too, for a policy <u>to put a stop</u> to the still continuing bloodletting of journalists.

This vicious circle is repeated often enough <u>that the fact of</u> winning becomes familiar reality to – and thus the basis of momentary hope for – any and all bettors.

Frankly, I don't know why Gonzales did not reprimand her for being three hours late and <u>give her to understand</u> that <u>not being able to use</u> a wangwang or escorted by cops in motorcycles and black SUVs with impenetrable windows was not an excuse to be late.

Some writers use longer phrases instead of using single words. Simple conjunctions, prepositions and single word verbs are replaced by longer phrases. The use of unnecessary words makes their sentences sloppy and lengthy. Here are the four sentences without the unnecessary words:

Other presidents just do other things later, <u>thinking they are useful</u> to the country.

But it is as important, too, for a policy <u>to stop</u> the still continuing bloodletting of journalists.

This vicious circle is repeated often enough <u>that</u> winning becomes familiar reality to – and thus the basis of momentary hope for – any and all bettors.

Frankly, I don't know why Gonzales did not reprimand her for being three hours late and <u>make her understand</u> that <u>without</u> wangwang or escort cops in motorcycles and black SUVs with impenetrable windows was not an excuse to be late.

Pretentious diction

The next category, pretentious diction refers to those foreign words and expressions that are used to give an air of culture and elegance. Only very few writers use foreign words in their columns. These words are:

en route, a faux pas, modus vivendi, wunderkind, status quo, de javu,
en banc, equus, fait accompli, onus

Many writers would like to sound imported. As in the case of these writers who used foreign words in their columns, they are either proud about their being bilingual or multilingual or they just want to emphasize something so they use foreign words to catch the reader's attention. Either case, the writer still deprived some of his readers from getting the right and clear message. They are giving the readers the burden of translating every foreign word found in their articles. Again, they are catering only to the elite group who usually has the richer vocabulary of foreign words. This is another manifestation of social inequality. John Leo suggests these two basic rules about the use of "big" and foreign words: "don't try to sound like other people, and learn all the big words you can, then strive mightily never to use them if a short word will do".

Conclusion

This study has shown that some writers of editorial and opinion articles are guilty of corrupting the English language. These writers who load their articles with fancy and who make useless circumlocutions at the cost of leaving their message vague, probably have not read this line by Ernest Hemingway - "Prose is architecture, not interior decoration, and the Baroque is over."

These writers somehow contributed to the deterioration of the English language. This decline has caused certain negative impact to the society. First, they become unfair to other members of the reading public especially to those who do not have the same understanding or the same set of expressions as themselves. Second, the use of confusing language by the writers may in the long run establish a kind of tolerance on the public who patronize their articles. People may become unconsciously conditioned by this shoddy and disheveled use of language and eventually would develop on them an inability to express their thoughts clearly and accurately. In short, these careless writers undermine the people's ability to think critically. And worse, as Orwell said, "a bad usage can spread by tradition and imitation, even among people who should and do know better". This cause-and-effect relationship is shown in this explanation by Robin Yeager (2007) about the relationship between language and culture – "language sows its own seeds of change; social context gives it the fertile ground to grow and spread".

On the other hand, this downhill turn of language can also be seen as a result of the public's tolerance for the confusing language of writers. Maybe it has already become their taste. The effect can also become the cause. "Language becomes ugly and inaccurate because our thoughts are foolish, but the slovenliness of our language makes it easier for us to have foolish thoughts. The process is reversible… if thought corrupts language, language can also corrupt thought", claims Orwell.

This researcher believes that these writers have somehow forgotten that their ultimate goal in writing editorial and opinion articles is to persuade readers on a particular issue. This can be achieved easier by using clear and simple language not by impressing their readers with sophisticated vocabulary. Candor, clarity and sincerity are important keys in writing according to John Leo. Hemingway insisted on brevity, economy, simplicity, strong verbs, and short sentences. Writing, especially editorial writing isn't a personal or private enterprise. It's an attempt to change consciousness and even change the world. In his book "The Ethics of Rhetoric*"*, Richard Weaver, as cited by Leo, says that the right to utter a sentence is one of the world's greatest freedoms. It is the liberty to handle the world, to remake it, if only a little, and to hand it to others in a shape which may influence their actions. Writing is power. If one writes well, one can have an impact.

Finally, this researcher isn't saying that metaphors, foreign words and other expressions cited above as abusive are entirely useless. They are may be of use in some forms of writing other than editorial.

References

Carillo, J.(2010)The two most dreaded English clichés have gone viral again. http://josecarilloforum.com/forum/index.php?topic=8/7/10

_____ . (2010) Language abuse and human consciousness from http://www.angelfire.com/nd/danscorpio/lang.html 8/10/10

Hirschberg, S.(1999). Reflections on language. New York. Oxford University Press.

Fraser, B .(1990). What are discourse markers?. Journal of Pragmatics 31. School of Education, Boston University, 605 Commonwealth Avenue,Boston, MA, USA Retrieved fromhttps://pdfs.semanticscholar.org/df4b/4b4f9a41.pdf

Krampen, M.(1987).*Ferdinand de Saussure and the Development of Semiology*. Classics of Semiotics. Retrieved from http://link.springer.com/chapter/10.1007%2F978-1-4757-

Heemant, P, et al. (1998)*. Identifying Discourse Markers in Spoken Dialog.*

Herwanan,A. (2010).A Semiotic Analysis on Kim Addonizio's Poems Based on C. S. Pierce's
       Theory.State of Islamic University, Syarif Hidayatullah,Jakarta

Hobbs,J. (1979) . Coherence and Coreference. SRI International. Retrieved fromisi.usc.edu/~hobbs/coherence-coreference.pdf

Leeth,D.(2010) Retrieved September 10, 2010 from
        http://www.term- papers.us/ts/da/evj96.stml 8/7/10

Leo,J. (2006). On good writing. Retrieved September 10, 2010, from
       http//www.johnleo.com/2006/10/23/on good writing

Price,EI. (2007).What's new? The effect of hip-hop culture on everyday English. eJournal USA. Yeager, Robin L. (2007). Society
       and values. eJournal USA. 1.