The Orwellian Present

What if language could be used to erase thoughts before they even form? That was the terrifying idea behind 'Newspeak' — the fictional language George Orwell created in his novel "1984", designed to control minds by controlling words.

Lately, references to Orwell's Newspeak have become increasingly common. These references are often accompanied by strong indignation. See for example, the article "In Trump's attack on the established media he is now using all means" (NRC [Dutch newspaper], February 18, 2025). That article begins as follows:

> "Stop using the old terminology and embrace President Trump's newspeak. Otherwise you will regret it.
>
> This was the not very subtle message from the White House, which last week indefinitely denied journalists from the American news agency Associated Press (AP) access to press moments with the president."

The reason, it turned out, was simply that the news agency refused to call The Gulf of Mexico *The Gulf of America* from now on.

In short, it's a good reason to take a closer look at this abuse of language. In any case, we then end up with Orwell's "1984" as the source of the concept of Newspeak.

That book also contains blatant reversals of reality. With some regularity, we see the same phenomenon cropping up in the 'real' world. I would like to dwell on that for a moment.

Newspeak and similar use of language

But first I would like to focus on 'Newspeak', in particular an older text on the subject. A quarter of a century ago, Jaap Schot wrote the essay "Newspeak, Oldspeak, 'Confuse speech' and 'Help speech'", in which he contrasted Newspeak with various other forms of 'speech'.

Most importantly, he claimed that Orwell's premise 'that Oldspeak, in comparison with Newspeak, would be OK' is not true. Jaap also writes that he can demonstrate 'Oldspeak is equally not OK' with many examples, but unfortunately he does not do so.

Nevertheless, I am prepared to accept that, e.g. past propaganda in Oldspeak was at least as bad as contemporary propaganda in Newspeak.

In the same text, Jaap suggest Oldspeak to be the logical counterpart of Newspeak. At first this looked like introducing the term Oldspeak.

However, that is not the case. After all, Orwell mentions Oldspeak quite early in his novel "1984". See following quote:

> By 2050—earlier, probably—all real knowledge of Oldspeak will have disappeared. The whole literature of the past will have been

> destroyed. Chaucer, Shakespeare, Milton, Byron—they'll exist only in Newspeak versions, not merely changed into something different, but actually contradictory of what they used to be.

Reversing reality

Today, Trump serves as a striking example. As we speak , he claims Ukraine started the war.

This strongly echoes Winston Smith's confusion in "1984".

Bewildered, but the main character was right not to believe the claim that Oceania (1) not only was at war with Eastasia, but actually (2) always had been at war with Eastasia. These claims were made, while Winston knew for sure that Oceania had been at war with Eurasia the very day before.

The exact example escapes me, but the point remains clear. After all, it's the idea that counts.

Of course, history had to be rewritten after this new representation of reality. Winston himself participated in that process. After all, he worked at the 'Ministry of Truth'.

I've said it before, and I'll say it again: for many years now, I have found this rewriting of history detestable. Unfortunately, it happens quite often, including in Putin's Russia.

If we let Trump – self-proclaimed 'deal maker' – have his way,

- Greenland and Canada will be taken over by the US,
- Russia will overrun 'our abandoned continent' Europe, and
- China will 'assimilate' Taiwan and Indonesia.

The world map might soon resemble the fictional map depicted in Orwell's dystopia.

Orwell's warnings remain eerily relevant in today's world — perhaps more than ever.