

ORWELL'S CONDEMNATION OF CLICHÉS: "Politics and the English Language."

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Abstract

Orwell used cliché in Animal Farm in 1945, despite the fact that he was to condemn it when he wrote, "Politics and the English Language" in 1946; the paper was finally published in 1947. This fact leads us to an apparent contradiction: he uses it, and yet he condemns it - thus the use of cliché in Animal Farm becomes a source of both controversy and investigation.

Key-words: George Orwell / Animal Farm / cliché / Politics and the English Language

1. Introduction

Clichés have been discussed for many years by many specialists [1]. However, it is still necessary to focus ORWELL's opinion on clichés. To start with, he questioned their use:

"A scrupulous writer, in every sentence that he writes, will ask himself at least four questions, thus: What am I trying to say? What words will express it? What image or idiom will make it clearer? Is this image fresh enough to have an effect? And he will probably ask himself two more: Could I put it more shortly? Have I said anything that is avoidably ugly?" [2]

Afterwards, he curiously answered them by stating: "you can shirk it by simply throwing your mind open and letting the ready-made phrases come crowding in." [emphasis added] [3]. Such then is the essential nature of this investigation - the essence of cliché as a "ready-made phrase" and the use ORWELL made of it to achieve either artistic or political purpose - or both.

2. "Politics and the English Language"

In fact, an attentive reader of ORWELL will perceive that he does not mention the word cliché at all or anywhere. However, he implies and indirectly alludes to it when he condemns "worn out and useless phrases" (...) and consigns it "into the dustbin where it

belongs.” [4] In his article - “Politics and the English Language” (1947) - **ORWELL** remarks:

*“If you use **ready-made phrases**, you not only don’t have to hunt about for words; you also don’t have to bother with the rhythms of your sentences, since these phrases are generally so arranged as to be more or less euphonious.” [5]*

Then, he adds:

“By using stale metaphors, similes, and idioms, you save much mental effort, at the cost of leaving your meaning vague, not only for your reader but for yourself.” [6]

These aspects highlighted by **ORWELL** are, in themselves, self-elucidating and need little additional commentary. According to **ORWELL** **vagueness** and **sheer incompetence** are the main features of modern English prose, specifically political writing.

In other words, prose consists less and less of words and more and more of “**prefabricated hen-house**”, that is the use of **cliché** which weakens what can be expressed through language; language becomes less vivid and leads to political acceptance and conformity, “the defense of the indefensible” (PEL, p. 166) and yet, though he condemned it, he also practiced it and admitted it:

This is just an example to illustrate the essential point of **ORWELL**’s contradiction. In order to discuss **ORWELL**, the writer, then there is the need to hold oppositions in balance.

“Look back through this essay and for certain you will find that I have again and again committed the very faults I am protesting against.” [7]

VOORHEES was among the first critics to detect and diagnose **ORWELL**’s essential contradiction:

“His rebellion extended even to literary criticism: he rejected the usual critical assumptions and denied that criticism was a force, good or bad, in culture. Because Orwell’s rebellion was comprehensive and occasionally violent, some critics have considered him to be neurotic. Their theories, however, attribute to him feelings which his whole life and all of his writing contradict.” [8]

A specific case in point is when he ironically uses a **cliché** “iron resolution” in **Animal Farm** (1945), [9] in split form, and condemns it as an example of a dying metaphor in his article **PEL** of 1947.

But this is not all; he states that in order to write well, it is necessary to avoid **clichés**. **ORWELL** even adds some rules which cover most cases; once again, it is imperative to quote at some length, in order to illustrate the point:

- i. **Never use a metaphor, simile or other figure of speech which you are used to seeing in print.**
- ii. Never use a long word where a short one will do.
- iii. If it is possible to cut a word out, always cut it out.
- iv. Never use the passive where you can use the active.

- v. Never use a foreign phrase, a scientific word or a jargon word if you can think of an everyday English equivalent.
- vi. Break any of these rules sooner than say anything outright barbarous.”
[emphasis added] [10]

Of these six rules the most important is the first one, which is equivalent to saying **NEVER USE A CLICHÉ**. But a **cliché** shows its value and its fitness to the text precisely because it is part of the right context; in addition, it may become an asset when it acquires a new connotation and represents a necessary formula to express what would, otherwise, remain unexpressed.

3. Analysis of Corpus: set of criteria

It is possible that **clichés** may be found in all sections of **Animal Farm**; however, it is necessary the one hand, to limit the subject somehow on the other, it is necessary to draw the line somewhere, and to focus only on the language of the leaders of the revolution, the **pigs**. Their language fits the classical Marxist approach, as **Major**'s first speech represents the revolutionary **thesis** in its initial purity, diagnosing evils and proposing the proper medicine; **antithesis** will be represented by **Napoleon** in his several speeches, that may eventually set the practice (praxis) as opposed to the theory; and **synthesis** will be focused on in several, subsequent voices such as **Snowball**, **Minimus** and **Squealer**.

The most important stylistic devices used are repetition of words, use of negative sentences to reinforce the message, parallel constructions to reinforce repetition, direct appeal to listeners. Noble echoes appear: The Bible, Shakespeare, and other eminent writers of English literature. The rhythm, slow and dignified, occasionally interrupted by rhetorical questions, moves as a great majestic wave that will eventually set the animals' cause right. Of all speeches to be considered, Old Major's is the most dignified, trustworthy, and sincere, he sets the principles, and the rest of the argument will be divergence from and distortion of such principles.

4. Conclusion

ORWELL succeeds in achieving this effect – his implicit condemnation of **clichés**, a general principle contrary to his best practice in **Animal Farm** – to the extent that he 'deflates' the meaning of words and leads people to general passivity, the product of political conformity – 'the defence of indefensible' – as he so well puts it, either through the manipulation of words or their influence on other animals' behaviour in the unforgettable tale that was once labelled 'a fairy story' by its teller, and yet has proved to be one of the most prophetic texts of our own days and times.

5. Bibliography

- [1] For additional information, see **PETTA**, Rosangela. "Os nossos chavões." In: **Jornal do Brasil**. Rio de Janeiro, April 9, 1987, Caderno B, p.1 and **MANSAR**, Luiz Carlos. "Mascando **cliché**". In: **Jornal do Brasil**. Rio de Janeiro, May 22, 1987, Caderno B, p.10.
- [2] **ORWELL**, George. "Politics and the English Language". Apud **ORWELL**, Sonia & **ANGUS**, Ian. In: **The collected essays, journalism, and letters of George Orwell**. Harmondsworth, Penguin, 1980, v. IV, p.165.

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Hereafter cited in abbreviated form, as **PEL**, with an indication of page number. Future references to any text which belongs to the same collection will be cited in abbreviated form as **ORWELL & ANGUS**, followed by volume number and page number.

[3] **ORWELL & ANGUS. PEL**, v. IV, p.165

[4] *id.*, *ibid.*, p.170.

[5] *id.*, *ibid.*, p.164.

[6] *id.*, *ibid.*, p.164.

[7] *id.*, *ibid.*, p.167.

[8] **VOORHEES, Richard J. The paradox of George Orwell**. USA, Purdue University Studies, 1971, p.11.

[9] Interesting enough, **ORWELL** splits the **cliché** in several passages, when he keeps the idea, but uses just part of the **cliché**, as he does, for instance in **Animal Farm - AF** (p.11): “And remember, comrades, your **resolution** must never falter” (...), or when he stresses, “Discipline, comrade, **iron** discipline” (p.50); or, as a last instance, he says, “He assured them that the **resolution** against engaging in trade and using money had never been passed, or even suggested.” (p.57)

[10] **ORWELL & ANGUS. PEL**, v. IV, p.169.