

# A Paean to Power: Resistance to GA and Orwell's *Nineteen Eighty-Four*

**Matthew Schneider**

**Department of English**  
**High Point University**  
**High Point NC 27262**  
[mschneid@highpoint.edu](mailto:mschneid@highpoint.edu)

Generative Anthropology strives for a parsimonious understanding of the human, and the simplicity, singularity, and minimality of the originary hypothesis and its derivative heuristic, originary analysis, grant GA an unmatched power to explain the essential dimensions of language and culture. That power is so substantial, in fact, that it often presents—especially to contemporary academics—a scandal, in the original, Girardian sense of that term: the very power of the theory becomes an obstacle not so much to its apprehension as to acceptance of GA's bases and implications. Those of us who have come to appreciate GA's elegance, rigor, and interpretive capabilities are all too familiar with the experience of trying to explain the theory to someone we think would appreciate it, only to be met with resistance and reflexive skepticism: "what you say makes sense—but, I don't know, it explains too much" or "that's a theory of everything, and I'm suspicious of totalizing narratives."

Meeting and overcoming these objections require not a better explanation or breakthrough elaboration of GA. Now in its fourth decade of life, originary thinking has been so intelligently developed and thoroughly, though not exhaustively, explored, that any resistance to generative anthropology must now be seen as arising not from any deficiency in the theory, but from an underlying anxiety about *power* itself. Those who doubt GA, in other words, do so not because they have discovered a previously undetected flaw in the theory's intellectual structure, but because GA's explanatory power and interpretive range makes them nervous. Resistance to GA arises not in spite of its power, but *because* of its power, and skepticism about GA in the absence of a compelling counter-argument reflects a psychic ambivalence about power in any form—mechanical, economic, intellectual.

This ambivalence is an extension of what GA recognizes as the victimary tenor of the post-Holocaust era (see *Chronicles* 40, 224, 230, 341, and 399). GA is well suited to explain this suspicion, because GA is both a powerful theory—that is, an analytic and interpretive method that performs mental work with particular efficiency—and a theory of power: it accounts for the emergence of the specifically human concept of power from the patterns of

animal dominance and submission that governed interpersonal relations in the pre-human community. Like the New Historicist cultural critiques inspired by Michel Foucault, GA recognizes the ubiquity of power—and its frequently unequal distribution among individuals—as an elemental aspect of human relations. Unlike New Historicism, however, GA does not simplistically conflate linguistic or intellectual power with physical and economic domination. Instead, GA highlights the ways in which metaphoric and theoretical power differ from and defer interpersonal oppression. GA identifies the crucial distinction between the power of a thought and the power of a blow. The foundational physical concepts of force (an influence that causes a free body to accelerate) and power (the rate at which work is performed or energy is converted) are, like all concepts, echoes of the originary moment when the central object of appetitive attention appears to exert a force that prevents its immediate, individual appropriation. To the participants on the scene, the object appears to emit a force at a distance, and by so doing it initiates the conceptual category of virtual—as opposed to immediate, physical—power. To the extent that language effectively redirects individual action, language delivers force over a distance, without an obvious transmitting medium. GA postulates that the linguistic transmission of force over a distance is less violent and potentially destructive to the community than its alternative, force expressed directly by physical contact. The elaboration of language, therefore, both in the evolution of increasingly complex grammatical structures (the ostensive, imperative, and declarative sentences) and in the accumulation of words, possesses an ethical function, with each new evolutionary stage constituting a new avenue for the deferral of violent mimetic conflict. Another way to think about this capacity of language to operate as a force over distance is to conceptualize representational deferral as conflict that has been restrained: a shove or a blow failed to hit its mark because it was intercepted by a force field seemingly emitted by the object.

In the originary scene, then, power—which in the protohuman world had been manifested directly, through tooth and claw—was transformed into yet another of those paradoxical essential characteristics of the human, like the sacred and the aesthetic: though it begins in the physical realm, power becomes metaphysical; it is both a means and an end, invisible but manifestly present. GA shows us, though, that language's virtual power is not illusory; in fact, it could be said that language and the cultural developments it makes possible act with sufficient materiality to obey—like all objects that possess mass—the first law of thermodynamics. Every time language defers what would have otherwise been a violent exchange, it transforms the kinetic energy of a shove or a punch or a kick into the mental energy of a thought or an utterance. Probably this represents a net savings—that is, fewer calories are expended between the two individuals than they would have in an exchange of blows—and the surplus of energy conserved can go into the further expansion of the language, which in turn drives the engine of cultural evolution. If language is the deferral of violence, then culture is a sort of energy reservoir, the conserved energy of human interaction that would otherwise have been expended in more or less violent intraspecific conflict.

This dynamic illustrates one of the precepts of GA, that culture evolves. Seeing culture as the product of linguistic elaboration, however, also helps to explain why the concept of power is so fraught. More inescapably than any other theory of the human, GA pushes us to acknowledge that symbolic and theoretical power, though far removed from the real of physical action, nevertheless reside on a continuum that stretches from brute animal force on one end to arcane metaphysics on the other. As a result, even metaphoric power is always tainted by what could be called its originary association with its physical and conflictive antecedents. This association, in turn, leads to an even more troubling anxiety, one inescapably linked to representation's power to defer conflict. If the power of language to defer conflict is increased by the development of richer and more complex forms of representation, then it follows that any reduction in representational complexity could result in an aggregation of physical power. The very fact that power is conceptualized—that is, converted from a physical fact to an idea—suggests that representation's deferral of conflict is reversible.

This is why power is so ambivalent, alternately celebrated and feared, and nowhere so much as in contemporary academia. On the one hand, linguistic sophistication is offered as an antidote to the exercise of discursive power by oppressive social institutions—this is the aim of critical discourse analysis, the theoretical basis for most contemporary American college rhetoric and composition programs. Students are, it is said, *empowered* by subjecting everything from television commercials to college textbooks to analysis of the implicit power relations enacted by those texts. On the other hand, making power the object of this kind of demystification has the inevitable counter-effect of heightening power's sacred mystique, increasing the suspicion with which intellectual and theoretical power are viewed. This is how GA's explanatory power interferes with acceptance of the theory. Power is celebrated and admired in the abstract; but even explanatory power always suggests its concrete, threatening forms, because even metaphoric and linguistic power evoke the physical power they originally deferred. Moreover, power is threatening because the serendipitous transformation of actual conflict into the concept of power is always reversible. To *simplify*—and the power of a minimal theory is indexed by the degree to which it simplifies complex phenomena—is to run the risk of reigniting the war of all-against-all that the emergence of language avoided on the originary scene.

The best example of this ambivalence about power comes from George Orwell, who has done as much as anyone to define the intellectual parameters of modernity. Orwell's name, made into an adjective, has become a synonym for politically-motivated distortion of language, and *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, his dystopic novel of socialist totalitarianism, is one of the best-selling books of all time. *Nineteen Eighty-Four* is also a prescient anticipation of GA's insight into the reversibility of language's ethical order. This is the lesson of the novel's careful description of the accretion of power through linguistic diminishment. Newspeak, the artificial language created by Ingsoc, the English Socialist party in control of Airstrip One, deconstructs individuality and freedom of thought not by replacing the English

language with ideologically orthodox words and phrases, but simply by reducing the number of words in the language. Officially, the aim, as the philologist Syme, hard at work on the eleventh edition of the Newspeak dictionary, tells the novel's protagonist, Winston Smith, is to "narrow the range of thought," and thereby make "thoughtcrime literally impossible, because there will be no words in which to express it" (*Nineteen Eighty-Four*, 46). But Syme unwittingly reveals the deeper purpose of Newspeak when he tells Winston that compiling the dictionary is a matter more of destruction than invention: "You think," says Syme, "that our chief job is inventing new words. But not a bit of it! We're destroying words—scores of them, hundreds of them, every day. We're cutting the language down to the bone. The Eleventh Edition won't contain a single word that will become obsolete before the year 2050" (45).

Orwell explains in depth the logic of Newspeak's destruction of words in a supplementary essay to *Nineteen Eighty-Four* titled "The Principles of Newspeak." That Orwell considered this essay indispensable to the novel is demonstrated by an incident from the book's original publishing history. When the Book-of-the-Month Club announced that it would send the book to its members, but asked to publish it without "The Principles of Newspeak," Orwell insisted that the edition include the essay, even though doing so threatened to cost Orwell an estimated £40,000 (in the end, Book-of-the-Month Club gave in, and published the book with the essay). As Orwell put it in "The Principles," "the purpose of Newspeak was not only to provide a medium of expression for the world-view and mental habits proper to the devotees of Ingsoc, but to make all other modes of thought impossible. It was intended that when Newspeak had been adopted once and for all and Oldspeak forgotten, a heretical thought—that is, a thought diverging from the principles of Ingsoc—should be literally unthinkable, at least so far as thought is dependent on words" (246). This was accomplished, Orwell continues, "partly by the invention of new words, but chiefly by eliminating undesirable words and by stripping such words as remained of unorthodox meanings, and so far as possible of all secondary meanings whatever" (246). The effect of this destruction is not just to restrict thought, however. The destruction of words is just one step in the forcible dismantling of the ethical order that a rich, varied, and complex language indirectly created. The heart of Newspeak is what Orwell calls in "The Principles" "the B vocabulary," which consists of ideologically correct words designed to transmit the limited thoughts allowed to party members. The B vocabulary is comprised of

short clipped words of unmistakable meaning that could be uttered rapidly and which roused the minimum of echoes in the speaker's mind. The words of the B vocabulary even gained in force from the fact that nearly all of them were very much alike. Almost invariably these words—GOODTHINK, MINIPAX, PROLEFEED, SEXCRIME, JOYCAMP, INGSOC, BELLYFEEL, THINKPOL, and countless others—were words of two or three syllables, with the stress distributed equally between the first syllable and the last. The use of them encouraged a gabbling style of speech, at once staccato and monotonous. And this was exactly what was aimed at. The intention was to make speech, and especially speech on any

subject not ideologically neutral, as nearly as possible independent of consciousness. For the purposes of everyday life it was no doubt necessary, or sometimes necessary, to reflect before speaking, but a Party member called upon to make a political or ethical judgment should be able to spray forth the correct opinions as automatically as a machine gun spraying forth bullets. His training fitted him to do this, the language gave him an almost foolproof instrument, and the texture of the words, with their harsh sound and a certain willful ugliness which was in accord with the spirit of Ingsoc, assisted the process still further. (253) The machine-gun metaphor for politically correct speech comes up at least twice in *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, and is captured in the Newspeak word *duckspeak*, which, depending on the object to which it is applied, is either the highest praise or the lowest condemnation. Yakking out meaningless utterances is duckspeak; but, writes Orwell, “when ‘The Times’ referred to one of the orators of the Party as a DOUBLEPLUSGOOD DUCKSPEAKER it was paying a warm and valued compliment” (254).

Duckspeak’s dichotomous nature touches on another of Orwell’s most important insights into language and power, the reliance of Ingsoc on doublethink. Winston calls doublethink “labyrinthine” (10); but in fact, it is quite simple: simply refuse to decide between a pair of mutually exclusive or contradictory propositions, and you have mastered doublethink:

To know and not to know, to be conscious of complete truthfulness while telling carefully constructed lies, to hold simultaneously two opinions which cancelled out, knowing them to be contradictory and believing in both of them, to use logic against logic, to repudiate morality while laying claim to it, to believe that democracy was impossible and that the Party was the guardian of democracy, to forget whatever it was necessary to forget, then to draw it back into memory again at the moment when it was needed, and then promptly to forget it again: and above all, to apply the same process to the process itself. That was the ultimate subtlety: consciously to induce unconsciousness, and then, once again, to become unconscious of the act of hypnosis you had just performed. Even to understand the word ‘doublethink’ involved the use of doublethink” (32-33). As Ingsoc’s arch-enemy Emmanuel Goldstein explains in *The Theory and Practice of Oligarchical Collectivism*—the forbidden book that lays out English Socialism’s principles, which Winston secretly reads prior to his arrest for thoughtcrime—doublethink transcends mere accidental contradiction and “ordinary hypocrisy” (178). It is, instead, an impudent and deliberate reversal of the factual order, nowhere better exemplified than in the names of the four Ministries that govern every aspect of life in Airstrip One: “The Ministry of Peace concerns itself with war, the Ministry of Truth with lies, the Ministry of Love with torture and the Ministry of Plenty with starvation” (178). Thus the alternative to doublethink is not another Newspeak word, like singlethink. Rather, doublethink’s conceptual opposite is language’s rich and inviting indeterminacy, which GA sees as a product of the central object’s paradoxical status as infinitely desirable and absolutely inaccessible. Doublethink is outrageous to Orwell because it deliberately overlooks this indeterminacy, thereby cutting us off from language’s aesthetic pleasures and marshalling the prodigious energies of the human will to repress violently the

linguistically-enabled drift of human thought toward increasing subtlety and complexity. In so doing, doublethink weakens language's power to defer violence, largely by interrupting the natural tendency of linguistic representation to interpose reflection and deliberation between thought and action. By attacking language at its thoughtful root, doublethink diminishes language's power to operate at a distance, forcing it to operate more like an instrument of direct force—less like a typewriter, and more like a machine gun.

In *Nineteen Eighty-Four* Orwell uses Goldstein's *The Theory and Practice of Oligarchical Collectivism* to show that the political structure of Airstrip One is the result not of rehabilitated chaos, but of careful social engineering. Winston is given a copy of this book by his nemesis, the inner party member O'Brien; but just as the "original motive" for the party's destruction of human equality is about to be revealed, Winston stops reading, is subsequently arrested, and has to learn that motive only in the course of his torturous reintegration into society as an obedient party member who loves Big Brother. O'Brien readily divulges the "central secret" of the totalitarian state: it consists of one word, power. The party seeks power not as a means to some utopian end, but as an end in itself—in GA terms, the complete dismantling of the ethical edifice of culture, and the return, via the annihilation of language's power to operate at a distance, to power as brute interpersonal force. "We are the priests of power," O'Brien tells Winston, "God is power," power not over nature, but "over human beings":

'The real power, the power we have to fight for night and day, is not power over things, but over men.' He paused, and for a moment assumed again his air of a schoolmaster questioning a promising pupil: 'How does one man assert his power over another, Winston?'

Winston thought. 'By making him suffer,' he said.

'Exactly. By making him suffer. Obedience is not enough. Unless he is suffering, how can you be sure that he is obeying your will and not his own? Power is in inflicting pain and humiliation. Power is in tearing human minds to pieces and putting them together again in new shapes of your own choosing. Do you begin to see, then, what kind of world we are creating? It is the exact opposite of the stupid hedonistic Utopias that the old reformers imagined. A world of fear and treachery and torment, a world of trampling and being trampled upon, a world which will grow not less but MORE merciless as it refines itself. Progress in our world will be progress towards more pain. The old civilizations claimed that they were founded on love or justice. Ours is founded upon hatred. In our world there will be no emotions except fear, rage, triumph, and self-abasement. Everything else we shall destroy—everything. . . . There will be no loyalty, except loyalty towards the Party. There will be no love, except the love of Big Brother. There will be no laughter, except the laugh of triumph over a defeated enemy. There will be no art, no literature, no science. When we are omnipotent we shall have no more need of science. There will be no distinction between beauty and ugliness. There will be

no curiosity, no enjoyment of the process of life. All competing pleasures will be destroyed. But always—do not forget this, Winston—always there will be the intoxication of power, constantly increasing and constantly growing subtler. Always, at every moment, there will be the thrill of victory, the sensation of trampling on an enemy who is helpless. If you want a picture of the future, imagine a boot stamping on a human face—for ever.’ (219-220)

What makes this Orwellian world nightmarish is its brutal—as opposed to elegant—simplicity. Nothing is simpler than the violence of a boot stamping on a human face; and this is why, I think, GA’s discursive elegance and interpretive power are threatening to those who express what they no doubt see as a healthy skepticism about generative anthropology. In a misapplication of the transitive property, power, violence, and simplicity are seen as equivalent; and since violence is simple, simplicity is violent. Theoretical parsimony therefore raises the specter of totalitarianism, and no one has shown the modern world better than Orwell how simple totalitarianism is. Totalitarianism is the world returned to its natural state, in which power acts not at a distance and over time, but directly and immediately. That he pointed this out as memorably as he did does not, however, make Orwell a quietist: indeed, the stark contrast Orwell draws in *Nineteen Eighty-Four* between language as power at a distance and totalitarian language as brute force shows that he understands all too clearly which is to be preferred. It also shows that Orwell, in his own way, intuited one of the core insights of GA: that language, as the defining characteristic of the human, gave us an less violent alternative for the expression of our animal power than the mimetic energy out of which language arose. In addition, Orwell seems to have understood that because language *defers* violence rather than supplanting or overcoming it altogether—a word is a blow that is not delivered—violence will always be language’s dark shadow. All this cements Orwell’s reputation as a trenchant critic of the postmodern age he inhabited and helped to define, an era (as Eric Gans writes in *Chronicle* 349) that is “grosso modo, a reaction to Auschwitz,” and in which “the human scene of representation, the source of human Being, is felt to be irremediably impure,” its “existence, however, inescapable” being “morally unacceptable” and therefore “must be unendingly deconstructed.” In *Nineteen Eighty-Four* Orwell shows where that deconstruction of representation leads, which is why this novel has always struck the post-Auschwitz world as forcefully as it has, and retains its power today. It illustrates—with *unmistakable power*—what there is to lose by indulging in such deconstructive pessimism, and declaring, with Adorno, “no poetry after Auschwitz.” To give up on language’s organic connection with the world—a connection that GA embraces—is to give up humanity’s most potent source of ethical progress.

## Works Cited

Orwell, George. *Nineteen Eighty-Four*. New York: Signet, 1961.