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**11.0 OBJECTIVES**

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**In this unit we shall**

- Discuss the 'ugly and inaccurate' English of George Orwell's times and connection between political orthodoxies and the debasement of language.
- Explore how language is used to achieve certain political and economic goals.

**On completing this unit, you should be able to**

- Know George Orwell’s idea of the political use of the English language.
- Understand the use of language for political purpose and how language is designed to make lies sound truthful and murder respectable, and to give appearance of solidity to pure wind.
- Distinguish political and normal use of the English language.

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**11.1 INTRODUCTION**

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Eric Arthur Blair (1903-1950), famously known by his pen name, George Orwell, is a well-known English novelist, essayist and journalist. His famous works include his novels like, *Down and Out in Paris and London* (1933), *Burmese Days* (1934), *A Clergyman’s Daughter* (1935) *Animal Farm* (1945), a dystopian novel, *Nineteen Eighty-Four* (1949), and non-fiction works such as *The Road to Wigan Pier* (1937) and *Homage to Catalonia* (1938). His works are marked by lucid language, keen intelligence and wit, awareness for social injustice, rejection of totalitarianism, and defence of democratic socialism.

Published in 1946 in a journal named *Horizon*, Orwell’s essay “Politics and the English Language” shows how political and economic causes bring about the decline of a language. Orwell here links the decline of the English language to the degradation of political rationale. He stresses that there is a strong need to fight against imprecise and unclear use of language. Through the examples of five short passages, Orwell suggests that political and economic motifs have degraded the English language of his time. He hints at how language is designed to make lies sound truthful and murder respectable, and to give appearance of solidity to pure wind. This essay highlights how staleness of imagery and lack of precision have diminished the English prose of his time.

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**11.2 OPENING OF THE ESSAY AND THE STATEMENT OF PURPOSE**

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The essay opens with a thematic statement that clearly says, “the English language is in a bad way.” He argues that the civilisation of his time is decadent and, as a result, so is the language. He says that any conscious struggle against the abuse of language is often considered a kind of “a social archaism” by those who believe that “language is a natural and not an instrument which we shape for our own purposes.” He makes it clear that the decline of a language is brought about by the political and economic causes and not by the influence of any writer. He stresses the need to fight against the imprecise and unclear use of language. He offers an analogy to a drunkard man to highlight how the decline of the English language has taken place:

“A man may take to drink because he feels himself to be a failure, and then fail all the more completely because he drinks. It is rather the same thing that is happening to the English language. It becomes ugly and inaccurate because our thoughts are foolish, but the slovenliness of our language makes it easier for us to have foolish thoughts.”

Orwell argues that the condition of the English language and the intellects of those who speak it is akin to that of a drunkard who considers himself a failure ignoring a fact that because he is a drunk, he fails even more. The language becomes ugly and inaccurate because of the foolish thoughts of the English speakers. Once the language becomes unintelligible, it is common for the speakers of that language to have even more unclear thoughts.

Though the English language of his time is in a degraded state, Orwell seems very optimistic and acknowledges that “the point is that the process is reversible.” He says that the written English of his time is full of bad habits, and this is because of the blind imitation. However, it is not difficult to avoid making any mistake if one takes necessary trouble. By making a conscious effort to avoid such bad habits, one can think more clearly. To think clearly is a necessarily first step towards political regeneration. By saying that “the fight against the bad English is not frivolous and is not the exclusive concern of the professional writers,” he admits that this is a fight for everyman who speaks the English language.

- **Check Your Progress 1**

**Read the following statements and write, “T” or “F” accordingly for “True” or “False” statements in the space provided.**

- i. George Orwell believes that the civilisation of his time is decadent and so is the English language of his time. \_\_\_\_\_
- ii. Orwell supports the evolutionary nature of the language in his arguments. \_\_\_\_\_
- iii. The analogy to a drunkard makes Orwell’s the point clear that the language is in the state of decay hence it has obscured the meaning and its writer is not at a fault at all. \_\_\_\_\_
- iv. Looking at Orwell’s arguments, one can say that he is not optimistic about the future of English language of his time. \_\_\_\_\_
- v. By thinking clearly one can save the language from the political degradation. \_\_\_\_\_
- vi. According to Orwell, the professional writers can contribute a lot in saving the English language from possible decay. \_\_\_\_\_
- vii. In Orwell’s view, it is not our responsibility to bring a change in language. Language changes automatically with passage of time. \_\_\_\_\_

- viii. The political use of language means to obscure meaning of the language for achieving the political and economic goals.
- ix. In this essay, Orwell unnecessarily falls in a trouble of politicisation of language. He is blind to the different usages of language.
- x. The fight against the political use of language is very much difficult.

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### 11.3 EXAMPLES OF UNCLEAR LANGUAGE

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To make his point more clear, George Orwell uses five small passages that demonstrate unclear use of language. Through these examples, Orwell wants to highlight the vices from which the speakers of the English language suffer.

The first excerpt is from one of the essays by Professor Harold Laski in the collection of essays called “Freedom of Expression.” This excerpt is an example of the problem caused by the use of double negatives. Professor Harold Laski uses five negatives in a statement of fifty-three words. According to Orwell, unrequired and repeated use of negatives makes the sentence superfluous and nonsense. He further states that the use of a word “alien” for “akin” makes the whole statement more nonsensical and clumsy and increases the general vagueness of the statement.

The second excerpt is from *Interglossia* by Professor Lancelot Hogben. The use of mixed metaphors makes this excerpt unintelligible. Professor Hogben uses two metaphors back-to-back so that neither makes any sense. In this example, Professor Hogben simply criticises the use of native idioms such as “put up with” instead of “tolerate” and “put at a loss” in place of “bewilder”, but the use of metaphors obscures its meaning.

The third passage is taken from an essay on psychology published in *Politics* in New York. It is marked by the excessive use of jargons that make it nearly impossible to understand. One can make out its sense by reading the whole article in which it occurs.

The fourth passage is taken from a pamphlet containing the communist propaganda. This passage contains stale phrases that have lost their meaning. In words of Orwell, the platitudes or the stale phrases choke the writer’s intention “like tea leaves blocking a sink.”

The fifth passage is derived from a letter to the editor published in *Tribune*. In Orwell’s opinion, in this passage, the excessive use of emotionally charged phrases has resulted in “words and meaning have almost parted company.”

Using these five examples, Orwell makes it clear that each passage its own faults but two qualities are common in them: (i) staleness of imagery, and (ii) lack of precision. He sees three possibilities for the failure of conveying the exact meaning: (i) the writer has a meaning but cannot express it, (ii) he inadvertently says something else, and (iii) he is almost indifferent as to whether his words mean anything or not. Orwell observes that the Modern English (the English language of his time) is marked by the mixture of vagueness and sheer incompetence – an essential characteristic of any kind of political writing. According to Orwell, when certain topics are raised, the concrete ideas melt into the abstract and obscure notions which are mostly hackneyed. He observes that the English prose of his time consists of less and less words chosen for the sake of their meaning. Instead, the English prose is packed with more and more phrases that together make it appear like the sections of a prefabricated hen-house.

### **Check Your Progress 2**

**Answer the following question in two or three sentences.**

1. What makes an excerpt from Professor Harold Laski's essay obscure and meaningless?

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2. What do you mean by 'mixed metaphors'?

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3. What makes the third example difficult to understand?

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4. What are the problems you see in the fourth example that make its meaning vague?

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5. What makes the reader to feel that “words and meaning have almost parted company” in the fifth example.

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6. What are the major problems, according to Orwell, in all the five examples?

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7. What are the three possibilities for the failure of conveying the exact meaning?

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8. What quality of the political writing does Orwell find in the English prose of his time?

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9. What makes the English prose of Orwell’s time obscure and vague?

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## 11.4 TRICKS BEHIND PLOT-CONSTRUCTIONS

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Orwell examines four tricks using with the plot-construction of the English prose of his time is habitually carried out. These tricks are: (i) dying metaphors, (ii) operators or verbal false limbs, (iii) pretentious diction, and (iv) meaningless words.

**Dying Metaphors:** A newly invented metaphor assists thought by evoking a visual image, but a dead metaphor fails to call to mind such visual image. Orwell adds the third category of metaphors to this list i.e., “worn-out metaphors”. These worn-out metaphors are in fact dying metaphors which have lost their evocative power and are used because they save people from the trouble of inventing phrases for themselves. The list of dying metaphors includes the phrases like: *Ring the changes on, take up the cudgel for, toe the line, ride roughshod over, stand shoulder to shoulder with, play into the hands of, no axe to grind, grist to the mill, fishing in troubled waters, on the order of the day, Achilles’ heel, swan song, hotbed*, etc. Many of these metaphors are used without the knowledge of their meaning (for example, what is ‘grist’?) and thus they become incompatible. Such metaphors evoke the idea in the mind of readers that the writer is not interested in what he is saying.

**Operators OR Verbal False Limbs:** Many writers use ‘operators’ or ‘verbal false limbs’ to escape from the trouble of picking out appropriate verbs and nouns. Instead of appropriate verbs and nouns, these writers pad each sentence with extra syllables which give it an appearance of symmetry. Examples of operators are: *render inoperative, militate against, make contact with, be subjected to, give rise to, give grounds for, have the effect of, play a leading part (role) in, make itself felt, take effect, exhibit a tendency to, serve the purpose of*, etc. The key purpose of using such operators is elimination simple verbs. While using such operators, single words are replaced by the phrases; passive voice is preferred in place of active voice; noun constructions are used instead of gerunds; the *-ize*, the *de-* and the *not un-* formations are used frequently; simple conjunctions and prepositions are replaced by such phrases as *with respect to, having regard to, the fact that, by dint of*, etc.; and, the ends of sentences are saved by commonplace anticlimax.

**Pretentious Diction:** Pretentious diction suggests the use of certain words (*phenomenon, element, objective, categorical, effective, virtual, basic, primary*, etc.) that dress up a simple statement and give an air of scientific impartiality to biased judgements. Certain adjectives (*epoch-making, epic, historic, unforgettable, triumphant*, etc.) are also used to dignify the sordid process of international politics, and, the foreign words and

expressions (*cul de sac, ancien regime, deus ex machina, mutatis mutandis, status quo*) are used to give an air of culture and elegance. According to Orwell, the bad writers, especially scientific, political and sociological, always think that the foreign words and jargons are grander than the original ones. The use of such pretentious diction results in an increase in slovenliness and vagueness.

Meaningless Words: Orwell notices that in certain kind of writing, particularly in art criticism and literary criticism, the readers commonly come across the long passages which are almost completely lacking in meaning. He gives the examples of words such as *romantic, plastic, values, human, dead, sentimental, natural, vitality*, etc. that are commonly used in art criticism and argues that these words are meaningless in a sense that they do not point out any discoverable objects. According to Orwell, the English prose writers of his time are more engaged in using such meaningless words that have killed the liveliness of the English prose and have made it more obscure.

### **Check Your Progress 3**

Explain the following terms with suitable examples. You may use the original essay to cite the examples of each term.

#### 1. Dying Metaphor:

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#### 2. Operators:

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#### 3. Pretentious Diction:

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#### 4. Meaningless Words

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### 11.5 GOOD ENGLISH VS. MODERN ENGLISH

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Orwell does not specifically define what Good English is. It is through his attack on the modern English, the readers come to know about the difference between good English and modern English. Orwell's takes a verse from *Ecclesiastes* and translates it into what he calls 'modern' English. Here is the original verse from *Ecclesiastes*:

“I returned and saw under the sun, that the race is not to the swift, nor the battle to the strong, neither yet bread to the wise, nor yet riches to men of understanding, nor yet favour to men of skill; but time and chance happeneth to them all”.

Here it is in modern English:

“Objective considerations of contemporary phenomena compel the conclusion that success or failure in competitive activities exhibits no tendency to be commensurate with innate capacity, but that a considerable element of the unpredictable must invariably be taken into account.”

He, then, compares the original (good) English with the 'modern' English. From this comparison, the readers can make out the following points.

The modern English uses too many phrases. Hence, it is difficult to understand any statement precisely. The modern English prose is full of abstractions and lacks concreteness. For example, the statement from *Ecclesiastes* uses forty-nine words and only sixty syllables. All the words of this statement are of everyday life. On other hand, the second statement, written in modern style, has thirty-eight words and total ninety syllables. In second statement eighteen words have Latin roots and one word has Greek root. The first statement with fewer numbers of syllables presents six vivid images and it contains one phrase only (“time and chance”), whereas in the second statement total ninety syllables seems



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## 11.6 POLITICS AND THE USE OF LANGUAGE

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Orwell also makes the connection between politics and the debasement of language clear. Orwell believes that the political motifs make the writing bad. It encourages orthodoxy, lifelessness, and imitative style. He argues that, in the political writings of any kind, one will certainly come across lack of a fresh, vivid and homemade turn of speech. By repeating familiar phrases, the writer arouses a feeling of dummies. When a speaker uses the already used phrases, he is unconscious of what he is saying. His condition is the same as the person who utters responses in church. In Orwell's view, this reduced state of consciousness is always in conformity with the political motifs.

Orwell believes that political speech and writing are largely defence mechanism for the indefensible. The political writings by using euphemism, question-begging and sheer cloudy vagueness justify the brutal acts. Such writings use the phraseology like 'pacification', 'transfer of population' or 'rectification of frontiers', and 'elimination of unreliable elements' for avoiding mental pictures of brutal behaviour carried out using these phrases. The political writers use the inflated style to make their writing euphemistic. They also use a mass of Latin words just like soft snow for blurring the brutality. When there is a gap between the writer's real aims and the declared aims, he turns to long words and exhausted idioms. Orwell sees this degeneration of language as a result of deterioration of politics. The politics has made the general atmosphere bad and as a result the language has become bad.

### ❖ Check Your Progress 5

According to George Orwell, the English language of his time was affected by the politics. Can you enlist certain points that demonstrate how the politics has influenced the language?

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- ii. ....  
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- iii. ....
- iv. ....
- v. ....

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### 11.7 THE WAY OUT

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Towards the concluding part of the essay, Orwell appears more positive. He says that the decadence of the language of his time is probably curable. He acknowledges that there may be certain people who may oppose this fact because of their belief in evolutionary nature of language. But he is very firm that silly words and expressions have often disappeared from language, not through an evolutionary process, but by the conscious action of those who care for language. He suggests that the English language of his time can be saved by eliminating flyblown metaphors, avoiding the *not un-* formations, and, reducing the amount of Latin and Greek words as well as foreign phrases and strayed scientific words.

Orwell makes it clear that his essay has nothing to do with the archaism, salvaging of the obsolete words and turning of speech or setting up of ‘standard English’, he is more concerned with the scrapping of every word and idiom which has outworn its usefulness. He says that the meaning should choose the most appropriate word. The selection of words and phrases should be such that it makes meaning clear and precise. Orwell suggests six rules make the language more clear and precise:

1. Never use a metaphor, simile, or other figure of speech which you are used to seeing in print.
2. Never use a long word where a short one will do.
3. If it is possible to cut a word out, always cut it out.
4. Never use the passive where you can use the active.
5. Never use a foreign phrase, a scientific word, or a jargon word if you can think of an everyday English equivalent.
6. Break any of these rules sooner than say anything outright barbarous.

More than these rules what is strongly needed is the change in attitude the writer. Orwell is pretty sure that using these six rules may not



<b>(noun)</b>	word with another word or words with a frequency greater than chance.
<b>Decadent</b> /'dɛkəd(ə)nt/ <b>(adj.)</b>	Characterized by or reflecting a state of moral or cultural decline.
<b>Diction</b> /'dɪkʃ(ə)n/ <b>(mass noun)</b>	The choice and use of words and phrases in speech or writing.
<b>Egregious</b> /ɪ'grɪ:dʒəs/ <b>(adj.)</b>	Outstandingly bad; shocking.
<b>Euphemism</b> /'ju:fəmɪz(ə)m/ <b>(noun)</b>	A mild or indirect word or expression substituted for one considered to be too harsh or blunt when referring to something unpleasant or embarrassing.
<b>Fascist</b> /'fæʃɪst/ <b>(noun)</b>	An advocate or follower of the political philosophy or system of fascism.
<b>Jargon</b> /'dʒɑ:g(ə)n/ <b>(mass noun)</b>	Special words or expressions used by a profession or group that are difficult for others to understand.
<b>Metaphor</b> /'mɛtəfɔː// 'mɛtəfə/ <b>(noun)</b>	A figure of speech in which a word or phrase is applied to an object or action to which it is not literally applicable.
<b>Neurotic</b> /njʊə'rɒtɪk/ <b>(adj.)</b>	Having, caused by, or relating to neurosis.
<b>Socialism</b> /'səʊʃəlɪz(ə)m/ <b>(mass noun)</b>	A political and economic theory of social organization which advocates that the means of production, distribution, and exchange should be owned or regulated by the community as a whole.

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## 11.10 BOOKS SUGGESTED

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### Dictionaries for Reference

1. *English Oxford Living Dictionaries:*  
<https://en.oxforddictionaries.com>
2. *Longman Dictionary of Contemporary English*

## Suggested Reading

1. Orwell, George. "English and the Politics of Language" (1946). <https://faculty.washington.edu/rsoder/EDLPS579/HonorsOrwellPoliticsEnglishLanguage.pdf>
2. Hammond, J.R. *A George Orwell Companion*. St. Martin's Press, 1982.

## ❖ ANSWERS

### Check Your Progress 1

i) T, ii) F, iii) F, iv) F, v) T, vi) F, vii) F, viii) T, ix) F, x) F

### Check Your Progress 2

- i. Professor Harold Laski's unrequired and repeated use of negatives makes his essay obscure and meaningless. He uses five negatives in a statement of fifty-three words.
- ii. The phrase 'mixed metaphors' suggests back-to-back use of metaphors. In such use of metaphors, neither metaphor makes intended sense clear.
- iii. The third example is full of jargons. Further, it is written in such a way that to understand its meaning, one is required to read the whole article in which it is written.
- iv. The fourth example contains stale phrases that have lost their meaning. The use of number of phrases has obscured its meaning.
- v. The excessive use of emotionally charged phrases makes the reader to feel that "words and meaning have almost parted company" in the fifth example.
- vi. According to Orwell, in all the five examples these two problems are common: (i) staleness of imagery, and (ii) lack of precision.
- vii. In Orwell's view, the three possibilities for the failure of conveying the exact meaning are: (i) the writer has a meaning but cannot express it, (ii) he inadvertently says something else, and (iii) he is almost indifferent as to whether his words mean anything or not.
- viii. The mixture of vagueness and sheer incompetence is the essential quality of the political writing of Orwell's time.
- ix. The English prose of Orwell's time is marked by the mixture of vagueness and sheer incompetence. He also observes that the English prose of his time consists of less and less words chosen for the sake of their meaning. These are two main reasons that make the English prose of Orwell's time obscure and meaningless.

### Check Your Progress 3

- i. "Dying Metaphors" means the "worn-out metaphors." Such metaphors have lost their evocative power and are used because they save people from the trouble of inventing phrases for

themselves. The list of dying metaphors includes the phrases like: *Ring the changes on, take up the cudgel for, toe the line, ride roughshod over, stand shoulder to shoulder with, play into the hands of, no axe to grind, grist to the mill, fishing in troubled waters, on the order of the day, Achilles' heel, swan song, hotbed,* etc. Such metaphors evoke the idea in the mind of readers that the writer is not interested in what he is saying.

- ii. Operators are also known as the verbal false limbs. The writers use the operators to escape from the trouble of picking out appropriate verbs and nouns. Instead of appropriate verbs and nouns, these writers pad each sentence with extra syllables which give it an appearance of symmetry. Examples of operators are: *render inoperative, militate against, make contact with, be subjected to, give rise to, give grounds for, have the effect of, play a leading part (role) in, make itself felt, take effect, exhibit a tendency to, serve the purpose of,* etc.
- iii. Pretentious diction refers to the use of certain words that dress up a simple statement and give an air of scientific impartiality to biased judgements, for example, *phenomenon, element, objective, categorical, effective, virtual, basic, primary,* etc. Or, Certain adjectives that are also used to dignify the sordid process of international politics (for example, *epoch-making, epic, historic, unforgettable, triumphant,* etc.), or, the foreign words and expressions (*cul de sac, ancien regime, deus ex machina, mutatis mutandis, status quo*) are used to give an air of culture and elegance.
- iv. Meaningless words refer to those words, particularly in art criticism and literary criticism, which are almost completely lacking in meaning. These words are meaningless in a sense that they do not point out any discoverable objects. The examples of such words are: *romantic, plastic, values, human, dead, sentimental, natural, vitality,* etc.

#### Check Your Progress 4

<u>Good English</u>	<u>Modern English</u>
i. It makes limited use of the phrases.	i. It is full of unnecessary phrases.
ii. It is clear and concrete.	ii. It is full of abstractions and lacks concreteness.
iii. It has an ability of creating a vivid image using a few words.	iii. It uses lots of words and phrases though fails in creating a vivid image.
iv. It uses proper words and phrases.	iv. It lacks proper the use of proper words.
v. It has freshness in it.	v. It is marked by the stale images.



### Check Your Progress 5

- i. The political influences have encouraged orthodoxy, lifelessness, and imitative style.
- ii. It has made the writer lazy by providing him/her the ready-made stock of the used metaphors. It has reduced the state of the writer's consciousness.
- iii. It has introduced the quality of dimminess by introducing already used words.
- iv. It has made the English language defence mechanism for the indefensible by using euphemism, question-begging and sheer cloudy vagueness to justify the brutal acts.
- v. It has made the writing inflated in style, euphemistic, and meaningless.

### Check Your Progress 6

Orwell, towards the concluding part of the essay, gives some suggestions to the English writers of his time. He appears positive when he says that the decadence of the language of his time is probably curable. And, it can be cared by taking some simple precautions. He believes that the English language of his time can be saved by avoiding the *not un-* formations, and, reducing the amount of Latin and Greek words as well as foreign phrases and strayed scientific words. Orwell is more concerned about the precise, clear, and meaningful use of words and phrases. He suggests the following six rules to make the language more clear and precise:

- 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.

Moreover, he believes that more than these rules what is strongly needed is the change in attitude the writer. Orwell is sure that using these six rules may not immediately correct the mistakes of the writer, but these rules will surely stop him committing the blunders.