An Analysis Of George Orwell’s “Politics And The English Language” Essay, Research Paper

My focus is upon a piece by Niccolo Machiavelli, an Italian prince from the renaissance period who writes “The Morals of a Prince”, and in an opposite vein, an essay by George Orwell, an English author and enemy of totalitarianism whose essay is “Politics and the English Language”. Within these essays I have found a similarity in which Orwell illustrates that ‘political writing becomes the defense of the indefensible, most political writing is bad, where it is not the author is usually a rebel who expresses his private opinions’. While this could be true of Machiavelli’s piece, he himself contends that ‘men who embrace the ideal, while rejecting the real, will only accomplish their ruin’

Machiavelli wishes to convince other statesmen of the necessary vices that a prince must possess to rule a kingdom. A bold stance is taken for the sake of reality “?Better to go after the real truth of the matter than ?.what people have imagined”. He offers rationalizations for why a prince cannot be good, and at the same time, reign effectively. Vice is a condition of humanity, a prince must therefore be cunning, miserly, feared, and dishonest to prevent himself, and his post, from being victimized. Manipulation is key lest friend or foe best him. Generosity cannot be practiced, otherwise he must recoup his loses in taxation, resulting in his subjects hatred of him. Though a prince should be feared, for fear of punishment prevents men from committing crimes against him. The latter is especially true in regard to soldiers during times of war; respect for their leader intensifies performance. ‘A prince must also be sly like a fox and wary of traps for he cannot defend himself against wolves. Therefore, he must not be honest because doing so would go against his best interest.’ Machiavelli argues “To preserve the state, he often has to do things against his word, against charity, against humanity, against religion”.

Consequently Orwell draws a connection between the misuse of the English language and politics, suggesting that it’s used as a tool to reword, alter, and deform its purest meaning, while confusing others into accepting defensive reaction and BAD politics. He contends that ‘political writing is done in modern English prose and through the misuse of archaic metaphors, showing incompetence and vagueness, further revealing the author’s lack of interest in what he is expressing. Political writing continues to prefer passive voice rather than active, as it substitutes simple verbs for general-purpose verbs while turning them into phrases by attaching a noun or adjective. Adjectives might be used to dignify international politics, glorify war, or to add an air of elegance. Misuse of Greek and Latin root words while adding “ize-formation” takes the place of the author’s inability to find appropriate words to convey meaning. Orwell claims most demonstrate laziness by employing parody, which “?consists of gumming together long strips of words which have already been set in order by someone else, and making the results presentable by sheer humbug”. Political authors often rely upon “Ready made phrases” ‘which construct sentences and imitate real thought processes. Horrific events become sugar coated by replacing and eliminating unreliable elements’. Pleas upon us are made ‘to never develop the habit of seeking replacement phrases or jargon in place of simple, clear, and expressive English. He points out that insincerity corrupts clear language, arguing that ‘if thought can ruin language, language can in turn ruin thought’.

Orwell takes a maxim rhetorical approach as he begins his essay by defining principles in a pragmatic way. Starting with what we must do in order to reshape our deteriorating language while blaming amoral political lifestyles. By reforming our bad habits, clear language will follow then we can move toward political regeneration. On the opposite coin, Machiavelli uses truism for his narration. Even as he writes of the vices that princes’ must possess, he wishes to convince us that his essay is quite frank and therefore moral because of it. He too defines principles as he begins his piece by explaining to his readers that he offers useful information with refreshing truths in place of previously imagined scenarios. A man, or prince, cannot possibly be good when most of civilization is not, how could he compete otherwise. Orwell could have been referring to Machiavelli’s piece when he adds, “In our time it is broadly true that political writing is bad writing. Where it is not true, it will generally be found that the writer is some kind of rebel”. He is a bit of a rebel for he is not afraid to voice his opinions even though they may not be favorably received. Putting aside the ostentatious reasoning he uses to bait his readers “The Morals of the Prince” is clearly written with only a few of Orwell’s “bad writing” techniques employed. Machiavelli writes, ” The man who neglects the real to study the ideal will learn how to accomplish his ruin, not his salvation”. With this he could have been speaking of “Politics and the English Language”, as Orwell ideologically adds, “?Decline of a language must ultimately have political and economic causes?. an effect can become a cause”.

With each of the two pieces written in a different era, Machiavelli’s from the renaissance period and Orwell’s from the mid 1900s, the similarities described by each could invariably have been referring to the other. To be fair, since Machiavelli’s piece was translated from Italian to English, we have to wonder how much of his meaning was lost, or gained, in translation. Seeing that it reads most clearly, I have to believe that what small percentage appears as “bad writing” may have been done on the part of the translator As Machiavelli craftily defends his vices through abstract reasoning. I could deduce that Orwell was closely correct in assuming, ‘political speech and writing can indeed be used, as the defense of the indefensible’, for Machiavelli certainly uses ornate writing to add credence to his theories. While Orwell ideologically stands his ground indicating that bad writing is interconnected politically, Machiavelli suggests that clinging to the ideal rather than the real, could cause a man to live a false reality and lead to his inevitable downfall. I feel both are a bit extreme, though our language may have changed substantially, it is unjust to say its cause should lie mainly with politics. I must add that I do not agree with “Morals” because corruption is necessary to rule.

Most of speech, or writing, is colored to some extent to aide politicians in the support of current issues. Language and politics seem to go hand in hand, for what would one be without the other. This of course is why reformists who seek to expose corruption and preserve justice, draw a connection between the two. Many clues lie within our language revealing the true intention behind the fa?ades. Still with all of this considered, I find that what was true of politics then is ironically true of politics now. Some aspects of the human condition appear to be ageless.

Bibliography

The Morals of a Prince by Niccolo Machiavelli

Politics and the English language by George Orwell

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