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GRADO EN ESTUDIOS INGLESES

Trabajo de Fin de Grado

Constructed Languages and British  
Dystopias: Exploring the Role of Nadsat  
and Newspeak in *A Clockwork Orange* and  
*1984*

Lucía Sanz de Andrés

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Abstract:

The present paper analyzes the role of the constructed languages of Nadsat and Newspeak in the literary works that contain them, two of the most representative novels of British dystopian fiction: *A Clockwork Orange* and *1984* respectively. The analysis focuses specifically on the ability these languages have to distance the reader from the story and allow them to reflect on language, on its influence on the creation of an individual identity and on societies' thought and behavior.

Key words: Nadsat, Newspeak, Constructed Languages, Dystopia, Individual, Society

Resumen:

El presente trabajo analiza el papel de las lenguas construidas de Nadsat y Newspeak en las obras literarias que las contienen, dos de las novelas más representativas de la ficción distópica británica: *La Naranja Mecánica* y *1984* respectivamente. El análisis se centrará específicamente en la capacidad que tienen estas lenguas para distanciar al lector de la historia y permitirle reflexionar sobre el lenguaje, sobre su influencia en la creación de una identidad individual y en el pensamiento y el comportamiento de las sociedades.

Palabras clave: Nadsat, Newspeak, Lenguas Construidas, Distopía, Individuo, Sociedad

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## 1. Introduction

Dothraki and Klingon are some of the most famous constructed languages in the world. Even though this paper will only deal with the role of constructed languages in literary fiction, there is a broader scope in the functions and purposes of artificial languages including international communication, such is the case with Esperanto. Fictional constructed languages can have different purposes within the story and the narrative, and they can be developed in various degrees. Also, some languages have been created from scratch, trying not to imitate any other natural language, these are called *a priori* and some examples are Valyrian and Na'vi; while others such as Atlantean and Trigedasleng, are *a posteriori*, they are based on one or more real languages.

Within fiction, whether it is literature, cinema or videogames, constructed languages are especially common in the science-fiction and dystopian genres, and in recent decades they have become a major phenomenon within popular culture, leading to an increase in people's interest in the language creation discipline. Proof of this is the Language Creation Conference, which has been held annually since its creation in 2006.

The reason why Science-fiction and dystopian works are the most recurring hosts for constructed languages is that they present a new society, which can be completely alien or the hypothetical development of a current one. Language is an essential element of any society, it is not only a means of communication, but also part of the culture, history and identity of any social group. A new community, therefore, requires a new language, since languages shape societies at the same time as societies sculpt their languages. This is what happens in the twentieth-century dystopian novels of *A Clockwork Orange* and *1984*, in which both authors present a British dystopian society where language plays a crucial role. Through the constructed languages of

Nadsat and Newspeak, reinforced by the dystopian genre of both novels, Burgess and Orwell alienate readers and make evident the power that language has in shaping the individual. Nadsat presents the importance of language on creating difference and building an identity, while Newspeak shows the ability of language to manipulate and control the thinking process and perception of reality.

## 2. Constructed Languages as a Device for Readers' Alienation

Authors incorporate constructed languages into their works of fiction in order that they serve as a literary device to enhance the alienation of the reader. "An utterance in a created language communicates the difference of the beings that speak it - the difference, that is, from readers' expectations for contemporary humans" (Cheyne 392). They are presented as something strange, a language different from the reality the reader is accustomed to, and they have different aims or roles within the story, but always presenting an element of strangeness before the reader. In addition, the way in which each language is developed, can create the impression of being further or closer to the reader's reality. As Cheyne explains, "the more ostentatiously an utterance flouts the norms of the language in which the rest of the text is written, the more exotic the author's intended perception of the beings who speak" (392). This distancing can be achieved, for example, through phonetics or spelling. Depending on which aspects of the language are different in relation to the reader's mother tongue, it will have a different impact on the reader's perception of that language and by extent, of the beings speaking that language. For instance, a language with a different writing system would be more striking to the reader, it would give the impression of being a more alien language, than a language that uses the same alphabet and instead incorporates variation in grammar or vocabulary in relation to the reader's native tongue. The alienness with which a language is perceived depends on the structural characteristics of the reader's

native language. “The norms for evaluations assumed by many English writers are always English language norms, so alienness is indexed by phonetic and lexicogrammatical systems that are exotic only in relation to English” (Stockwell qtd. in Cheyne 400).

This is the case of Nadsat and Newspeak, the way they alienate the reader is different, since these languages do not have the same role within their corresponding narratives. While *A Clockwork Orange* is written in Nadsat, Orwell’s Newspeak predominantly appears indirectly, that is, referenced but not shown. Though these languages create strangeness, they are, nevertheless, close enough to the reader’s reality to be able to guide them towards a critical perspective on these languages as well as their own. The reason for this is that both Nadsat and Newspeak have been developed from English, a language the audience of these novels is assumed to be familiar with, since both authors are native English speakers, and their main audience was the British or American public.

### 2.1. Alienation in Nadsat

The entirety of *A Clockwork Orange* is narrated in Nadsat by a first-person narrator, Alex, the main character of the story; and the readers’ attention is constantly drawn to the structure of the language, since it is striking both phonetically and visually. As Hollinger explains, “The effect is a language that functions as part of the narrative material which sets the story in the future; while remaining fairly comprehensible, it is also ‘foreign’ enough to distance Alex’s time from our own” (4).

He was creeching out loud and waving his rookers and making real horrorshow with the slovos, only the odd blurp blurp coming from his keeshkas, like something was orbiting within, or like some very rude interrupting sort of a

moodge making a shoom, so that this old veck kept sort of threatening it ...

(Burgess 20).

As presented in the previous fragment, the most characteristic features of Nadsat are its words of Russian origin (*creaching* meaning to scream, *rookers*, arms; *slovo*s, words; *keeshkas*, guts; *veck*, man...). Nevertheless, Nadsat is more complex than the mere incursion of Russian-inspired words: “Then there was crash and plop and a wish wish wish while the pennies picked up and dropped and lickturned the pages of their grazzy malenky hymnbooks ... ” (Burgess 89). Onomatopoeias (crash, plop), alliterations (pennies picked up and dropped) and word repetition (wish wish wish) are some of the linguistic resources Burgess incorporates in this new language. There is a permanent play of sounds that provides rhythm and musicality, suggesting a child-like style, reinforced by an absence of complexity in the syntax. “Many of Nadsat’s features do show a childlike ebullience, a delight in playing with language’s sounds, rhythms and meanings. Alex, after all, is still an adolescent during the first and second sections of the novel, and it often shows in his language” (Sisk 149). This playful, childish style contrasts with the violent personality of the protagonist and the atrocities that he and the other members of his gang commit, far removed from the childlike innocence Nadsat may suggest. In addition, the visual aspect of Nadsat distances the reader, since “[t]he novel [*A Clockwork Orange*] uses orthographic experimentation rather than standard phonetic renditions of sounds” (Goh 268). An example of this would be: “ ... hitting out car-tolchocks with the old naga and ptaaaaa and grrrrr and kraaaaark” (Burgess 69).

Moreover, throughout the novel there is no particular indication of which elements are Nadsat’s and which are not, although Alex will sometimes clarify the meaning of some Nadsat words. “Pete had a rooker (a hand, that is)” (8). There are also examples of the opposite, situations in which the Nadsat term is added after its English



version: “very built-up shoulders (‘pletchoes’ we called them)” (8). These clarifications appear mainly at the beginning of the novel as a way of introducing the reader to it in an organic way.

Furthermore, *A Clockwork Orange* was published for the first time in 1962, the time of the Cold War, a time dominated by a feeling of insecurity, living under the constant peril of the atomic bomb. “... [T]he argot entails an infiltration into working-class vernacular of the linguistic forms of the ideological adversary ...” (Hammond 672). Finding Russian words being used by the youth in an English society, might have been shocking and alienating. This is an example of how not only the linguistic aspect, but also the audience’s cultural background affects the degree of alienation that these constructed languages cause the public.

## 2.2. Alienation in Newspeak

Differently from Burgess’ work, Newspeak is not the language used to narrate the story, but rather modern English, or “Oldspeak” as it is referred to in the novel. Newspeak is the new language that the Party is modelling and beginning to implement with the objective that it will replace “Oldspeak” and be used as Oceania’s first language by the year 2050. It is a variant of “Oldspeak”, which is, essentially, Orwell’s contemporary English. Throughout the novel, Newspeak appears sporadically, with the exception of a few lines, which are the only developed primary material of Newspeak the reader is presented with. These Newspeak sentences are presented below:

times 17.3.84 bb speech malreported Africa rectify

times 19.12.83 forecasts 3 yp 4th quarter 83 misprints verify current issue

times 14.2.84 miniplenty malquoted chocolate rectify

times 3.12.83 reporting bb dayorder doubleplusungood refs unpersons rewrite

fullwise upsub antefiling (Orwell 40-41)

“There are fewer than forty different Newspeak vocabulary items used within the novel, and not many more than fifty instances of their use” (Jackson 50). In spite of these figures, it holds a very important role throughout the entirety of the story, as will be discussed later on. Readers are made aware of the use of Newspeak usually because Winston, the main character addresses it by explaining the meaning of a Newspeak concept, similarly to Alex in *A Clockwork Orange*.

Luchini analyzes the grammar in which he says there is “an almost complete interchangeability between different parts of speech” that is, “any word in the language could be used as verb, noun, adjective or adverb, the roots of all words in a lexical family deriving from only one arbitrarily chosen from.” In addition, “adjectives were formed by adding the suffix -ful to a noun-verb, and adverbs by adding -wise”, and “any word could be turned into its antonym by adding the affix un-, or could be strengthened by the affix plus- ...”. He also explains that the vocabulary is split into “three lexical categories: the A, B, and C Vocabularies.” Where words in section A “comprehended all words employed in everyday life” those in B are “compound words that had been constructed to impose a desirable political and mental attitude upon the person using them” and C holds a selection of words that “was supplementary to the others and consisted entirely of scientific and technical terms” (99 -100).

In addition, although throughout the novel it is not specified that it is a feature of Newspeak, whenever time is mentioned, it is done in the military format. Something that, although it is used today, is reserved for specific situations, not for day-to-day conversations. This is another way in which language is used in a controlled and mechanical way, echoing military discipline.

The dynamics of Newspeak are presented in the appendix to the novel, where there is a thorough explanation of the language’s grammar, syntax and aims. Newspeak

is not only strange for the reader during the novel, but this difference is highlighted with this appendix. The author is drawing attention to it, to the fact that it is something new and that it holds importance.

### 3. Language's Ability to Shape Society and the Individual

Through these constructed languages the reader is provided with the possibility to analyze and think critically about the power that language has on shaping the individual. The fact that Alex speaks Nadsat establishes a double differentiation that helps define his identity to the audience and also serves as a means to self-assert it. "Guha constructs a definition of the people ... that can be only an identity-in-differential" (Guha qtd. in Spivak 26). On the one hand, Nadsat grants Alex an identity of teenager and, on the other hand, an identity of rebellion against the main oppressive society and government portrayed in the novel.

The name Nadsat comes from the term equivalent in Russian to English "teen," since it is not only Alex and his gang who speak the language, it is also used by all the young people of this dystopian society. The younger generations have the necessity of establishing differences with their previous generations. This is not something new, it is the generation gap phenomenon and has been happening for centuries, even Socrates described it in his famous quote "The children now love luxury; they have bad manners, contempt for authority; they show disrespect for elders and love chatter in place of exercise. Children are now tyrants, not the servants of their households. They no longer rise when elders enter the room. They contradict their parents, chatter before company, gobble up dainties at the table, cross their legs, and tyrannize their teachers." Younger generations gravitate towards the exploration of elements that allow them to emphasize that difference. These changes or manifestations of difference can occur in many aspects of life including music, clothing, leisure activities, manners... as well as

language. “... [S]ociologists observe that youth deploy slang to differentiate themselves from the adult world, indicating their resistance to that world and its hegemonic culture” (Beier 512). This slang is often shaped by including new terms to their vocabulary or experimenting with spelling and phonetics. In *A Clockwork Orange*, Burgess develops these differences to such an extent that he creates a new language, which still holds a high degree of intelligibility in relation to English.

Alex’s group and other similar gangs have developed an identity of rebellion towards the novel’s society only taken to the extreme, since they are an ultra-violent gang. They are part of an “antisociety,” which, as Halliday (164) explains “is a society that is set up within another society as a conscious alternative to it. It is a mode of resistance ... an antilanguage is not only parallel to an antisociety; it is in fact generated by it” (qtd. in Kohn 3). They have built a criminal identity by committing acts of ultraviolence. They are aware of this and they do so willingly, they go against the values of the main society. These gangs are an “anticulture,” where Nadsat is their “anti-language.” “This teen-language functions as a means to separate themselves from the novel’s hegemonic dystopian culture, depicted as either tyrannical and inhumane or lifeless and unthinking” (Kohn 1).

Alex is aware of the difference that Nadsat grants him and manipulates it in his favor. Most of the time he speaks Nadsat, however, he switches to English when he knows that Nadsat will not be useful for whatever he wants or needs in that moment, when he wants to hide his identity. “‘A rather intolerable pain in the head, brother, sir,’ I said in my gentleman’s goloss. ‘I think it should clear by this afternoon.’” (Burgess 43). “Alex uses language as a weapon to influence or negotiate with the adult world, whether it be the strangers he can manipulate or the correctional officer he cannot” (Kohn 17). This is observed when the gang, in one of their nights of ultra-violence, decides to enter unknown

houses. In order to convince the strangers to let them in, they speak to them in a high variety of English. Alex would not only use this code-switching technique in those occasions, but also when talking to his supervisor or to some of the workers at the prison.

Speaking a language is a very powerful identity trait especially in a situation of comparison with those who do not speak it. That is, speaking a certain language establishes a difference, reinforcing and enhancing that group's collective identity. For instance, as explained in Clots-Figueras and Masella's Catalanian identity case-study "individuals who have experienced greater exposure to teaching in Catalan are more likely to declare that they chose a party with a Catalanist (i.e. Catalan regionalist) platform" (334). This difference can be empowering and help strengthen the sense of community in those that speak the same language. Which is one of the reasons why governments are concerned with and carry out language policies.

... [N]othing is less common than countries inhabited exclusively by people of a single uniform language and culture. Even in Iceland, with its 300,000 inhabitants, such uniformity is only maintained by a ruthless policy of Icelandization, including forcing every immigrant to take an ancient Icelandic name. (Hobsbawn 1068)

This is one of the reasons why many minoritarian languages have resurfaced with the emergence of some nationalisms, and how those nationalisms have grown stronger by acknowledging and taking pride in their endemic languages.

In Orwell's *1984* language is used as a means of controlling the population with the intention of manipulating their perception of reality. The Party is modelling a new language where there is no space for double-meaning and the words in its dictionary are being constantly reduced. The idea behind these changes is that if a word or meaning does not exist, then people cannot imagine it, name it, think about it or, if it is an action, carry

it out. That is, the Party believes that language affects people's perception of reality. This is a trend "in modern linguistics and philosophy [where] language is considered a mechanism and way of constructing reality rather than a means of describing reality" (Zoylan 131-132). With the creation of Newspeak, Orwell introduces the ideas of the Saphyr-wolf hypothesis. "The key proposal of the linguistic relativity hypothesis ... is the idea that the language that people speak affects the way that they think." (Cheyne 395). It is a controversial theory and linguists agree with it in different degrees, attending to varying levels of linguistic determinism. Many linguists reject Orwell's approach, the idea of total determinism, since it is considered to be very drastic: "the so called extreme version of the hypothesis claims that determining effect of language on thought is total, that is to say that people can only think in terms of what can be expressed by means of their language" (Luchini 100). This implies a perception of reality framed by the speaker's language. However, the fact that a word is not present in a language does not mean that speakers cannot imagine the concept, since it can be described using other words. The most accepted approach is the "moderate version of the hypothesis [which] acknowledges some direct incidence of language on thought, but entirely disregards total determinism" (100). The Party in *1984* follows the most deterministic approach, believing that if Newspeak were established in 2050 and Oldspeak were no longer in use, the population in Oceania would have a different perception of reality compared to those who do speak Oldspeak.

In the real world, language is often used to distort the way the recipients of that message process reality. An example of this is political propaganda. However, the totalitarian government of *1984*, self-named "The Party," does not settle for using the pre-existing language (or Oldspeak) to manipulate its citizens, but rather creates a new language. "Despite having been proved wrong by modern Linguistics, the extreme

version is the one that best describes the nightmarish totalitarian system depicted in 1984” (Luchini 100). This language is tailor-made so that reality is processed through it in the way that best suits the leaders. In order to do so, one of the devices the Party uses is the drastic reduction of the number of words in the language, as well as the meanings of these, so that there is no room for double meanings or misinterpretations. Moreover, new terms are introduced such as newspeak, thoughtcrime... these terms are essential to explain and support the philosophy of the Party. Thoughtcrime takes place when people think of doing something morally questionable (attending to the morals of that specific society), even if it is during their sleep. “Every year fewer and fewer words, and the range of consciousness [is] always a little smaller. Even now, of course, there’s no reason or excuse for committing thoughtcrime. It’s merely a question of self-discipline, reality control” (Orwell 55). Following the deterministic hypothesis (and The Party’s belief), these behaviors would not take place if Newspeak were their first and only language.

In order to reduce the lexicon, The Party has a department in charge of developing a Newspeak dictionary which holds the official compilation of Newspeak words and is in a constant process of being reissued. “We are getting the language into its final shape – the shape it’s going to have when nobody speaks anything else” (53). With the evolution of societies, Dictionaries are usually more extensive with each edition, since new ideas, concepts, objects... appear every year. Also, words from other languages are incorporated, new meanings are added to pre-existing words... “You think, I dare say, 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” (53-54). However, in each Newspeak edition, the number of words is reduced and there are no incoming words or borrowings from other languages.

#### 4. Conclusion

In conclusion, constructed languages are a narrative element that is quite common in dystopias. These languages have the ability to distance the reader in various ways from the story as well as allow them to be aware of the influence that language has on human beings. Burgess and Orwell developed two constructed languages from English with different roles on their stories and narratives both of which are alien enough for the reader to adopt a critical perspective of them. *A Clockwork Orange*'s narrative language, Nadsat presents an innovative lexicon and experimentative grammar which highlight the close relationship between language and identity. And *1984*'s Newspeak, by reducing its vocabulary, establishing a systematized grammar and introducing key terms to support the societies' ideas, presents linguistic determinism and its consequences when used by a totalitarian government. Burgess and Orwell present two contrasting uses of language, while Nadsat is a symbol of rebellion, Newspeak is used as an oppressive element. Constructed languages in literature, therefore, increase the scope of study of human beings by analyzing the role of linguistics in any given society. As such, further research addressing the relationship between linguistics and literature, artificial languages and their functions is needed, as it has not been a target subject of study by the linguistics community.



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