

George Orwell's critique of internet English

The concerns of Orwell's 1946 essay remain notably relevant to the changes in written language wrought by the digital age

George Orwell fails to return any useful results from his Google search. Photograph: Mondadori/Getty Images

Some while ago, with reference to Orwell's essay on ["Politics and the English language"](#), I addressed the language of the internet, an issue that stubbornly refuses to go away. Perhaps now, more than ever, we need to consider afresh what's happening to English prose in cyberspace.

To paraphrase Orwell, the English of the world wide web – loose, informal, and distressingly dyspeptic – is not really the kind people want to read in a book, a magazine, or even a newspaper. But there's an assumption that that, because it's part of the all-conquering internet, we cannot do a thing about it. Twenty-first century civilisation has been transformed in a way without precedent since the invention of moveable type. English prose, so one argument runs, must adapt to the new lexicon with all its grammatical violations and banality. Language is normative; it has – some will say – no choice. The violence the internet does to the English language is simply the cost of doing business in the digital age.

From this, any struggle against the abuse and impoverishment of English online (notably, in blogs and emails) becomes what Orwell called "a sentimental archaism". Behind this belief lies the recognition that language is a natural growth and not an instrument we can police for better self-expression. To argue differently is to line up behind [Jonathan Swift](#) and the prescriptivists (see Swift's essay ["A Proposal for Correcting, Improving and Ascertaining the English Tongue"](#)).

If you refer to "Politics and the English Language" (a famous essay actually commissioned for in-house consumption by Orwell's boss, the Observer editor David Astor) you will find that I have basically adapted his more general concerns about language to the machinations of cyberspace and the ebb and flow of language on the internet.

And why not? First, he puts it very well. Second, among Orwell's heirs (the writers, bloggers and journalists of today), there's still a subconscious, half-admitted anxiety about what's happening to English prose in the unpoliced cyber-wilderness. This, too, is a recurrent theme with deep roots. As long ago as 1946, Orwell said that English was "in a bad way". Look it up: the examples he cited are both amusingly archaic, but also appropriately gruesome.

Sixty-something years on, in 2013, quite a lot of people would probably concede a similar anxiety: or at least some mild dismay at the overall crassness of English prose in the age of global communications.

Orwell's polemical reach runs out, appropriately, soon after the 1980s. Then, the biggest paradigm shift since Gutenberg and Caxton took us into uncharted waters, on which we are now, very slowly, orienting ourselves. Until very recently, we were so lost (and at sea) in the fog of digital transformation that very few were willing to get to grips with the problem of online literary standards. Or, to put it another way, we became so exhilarated by the freedom of the new media that we weren't willing to grapple with the responsibilities that came with

liberation.

Not any more. Those first, heady days are done. It's time for a new covenant. Yes, it's one that can take inspiration from Orwell's celebrated polemic. It's also good to set his call to arms next to the practices of online English prose because, among the guardians of contemporary culture (cyber and otherwise), the author of *Nineteen Eighty-Four* remains a talisman. Those who assert the "democratic" and "free" qualities of the worldwide web would probably cite his famous essay with approval in any discussion of English usage today.