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LANGUAGE AS A MEANS OF SOVIET THOUGHT CONTROL

[Following is the translation of an article by Kurt Stegmann von Pritzwald in Osteuropa (Eastern Europe), Vol 11, No 2, Stuttgart, February 1961, pages 98-108.]

It is a well-known fact that in the Soviet area words such as "Democracy", "Freedom", "Science", etc. mean something quite different from Western usage. During a recent visit to the Near East I noticed that the distinction between "L'Allemagne federale" (German Federal Republic) and "L'Allemagne democratique" (German Democratic Republic) is wide open to misunderstanding. A simple Lebanese thinks that "democratic Germany" (Soviet Zone) practices that form of government which the US advertises all over the world as "Democracy". Here we have a very obvious example showing that opinions are not formed from facts but from words, that is, opinions can be monitored by words.

This fact is exploited cleverly and systematically by the Soviet leaders in their domestic and foreign propaganda in order to shape the ideological thinking of the masses. The instrument for this monitoring are the "language modifications" which ideologically determine or re-define the meaning of certain words. It is as if the words were wearing masks, or, expressed in a positive way; language modification means that communication between people runs along the prescribed mental tracks, that speech is governed by direction signals which summon or prohibit, as the case may be. Speech and thought will then be linear, it will run along the prescribed line.

Some might ask "Is such a thing possible? How can it be done?", because it seems unbelievable that the freedom of thought could be strangled by language modifications. But are we in the West safe from this? Does not the language of advertising call for specific reactions? In diplomacy, language modifications have always played an important part. Just how effective the demagogic quality of language modifications may be is shown in the following example by the Italian diplomat Daniele Vare. In his recollections of his diplomatic service in the US in 1936 he tells about the demagogic governor H. Long, who was once asked: "Do you believe that we will ever have Fascism in our country?", and he answered: "Of course, my friend, only we shall call it 'Antifascism'!"

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Basic Forms of Soviet Thought Control
By Means of Language

Political influences on the modification of language have always existed. One of the best-known examples is the nationalistic battle cry "Avoid Foreign Words!" In the revolutionary Russia of Lenin, in 1920 the watchword was "Our shock task is to create a selective language, that is, by artificially planned selection during the fundamental events which are now in process." (R. Jakobson, Slavische Rundschau (Slavic Review) 6, 1934, page 327). Language modification is, then, a planned selection. How has this claim, which is here characteristically clothed in biological terms, been realized?

a) The "Front Style" of linguistic usage. All his life Lenin tirelessly worked to realize in words and deeds the claim of Marx that it is not necessary to understand the world, but rather to change it. Accordingly, Oelssner in 1951 wrote in the newspaper Das Neue Deutschland (New Germany) "Correct speech is directed towards fighting for changes in the world in the interest of mankind". Occasionally this only means that the "new" man should speak a new language. Old concepts are therefore clothed in new words. Do you know, for instance, what a "sight solicitor" is? He is the man who designs streamers and signs carrying slogans. Or, for instance, in the Ostbahnhof [East railroad station] in Berlin there is a sign which says, "Overseers, be polite!" The new word "overseer" instead of station master is supposed to signal in a flash that in the "New Germany" there are no longer "masters" - that is, public officials - in the traditional sense of the word. The entire Leipzig edition of the well-known dictionary by Duden shows how far the languages of Western and Eastern Germany have grown apart already (see recent article by Lutz Mackensen, "Gespaltenes Deutschland - gespaltene Sprache" (Split Germany - Split Language) in Universitas, 15, 1960, p. 817).

The activist style and vocabulary of the Soviet leaders stems from Lenin's activist theories: "Shock task", "active movement", "active fight", "stormy development", etc. A favorite word in Russian, Czech, and Polish usage is the word derived from the German "Sturm" [Storm]. The "storm man" is the activist, and "storm work" is the method of shock crews to work wherever there is trouble. We can characterize this style briefly as the "fighting front style". Soviet thinking does not know any borders, it knows only fronts. Therefore they speak of the "agricultural front", the "scientific front", the "theatre front", etc. A group of linguists who were opposed to the linguistic theories of J. Marr designated themselves as the "linguistic front" (1929-1930). Accordingly, the introduction to the textbook of pedagogy by Ogorodnikov-Shimterev (1951): "The task of Soviet pedagogics is to arm the army of millions of workers on the pedagogical front with the progressive theory of Communist education..." Other examples of this front style are

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"to gird oneself with the sharp weapons of Marxist-Leninist theory" (Stalin), "to stand watch for peace", "to be a fighter for peace", "to form shock-brigades". Accordingly, the greeting among the so-called Young Pioneers, the Soviet youth organization, is "Be ready!" Occasionally the Soviet front style turns comical, in a sentence such as "the potato cadres were used operatively", which means "the shock crew of potato pickers started working". From Lenin's vocabulary we hear repeated over and over again the slogans "irreconcilable fight", "inveterate fight", "ceaseless fight", "firm-as-a-rock fighting party of the proletarian revolution", "furious resistance of the bourgeoisie", etc.

The activist style verbs, that is the "do"-words, are especially suited for demanding and propagating changes in the environment. In this way many verbs have acquired a special revolutionary meaning and are then understandable only in this narrowed sense. To these belong verbs like "strengthen", "master", "develop", "unfold", "manufacture", "pull through" and, on the other hand, "smash", "break", "destroy", "liquidate", etc. Sometimes, because the meaning of such verbs has been narrowed down so, a sentence becomes unintelligible, even comical, for instance: "Each circle leader develops a circle assistant." That is supposed to mean "He takes on an assistant and trains him for the job". A strange example of activist formulation is "Goethe and Schiller were moving factors of historical development."

Finally we shall give examples of the uniformity of the Soviet press in many different languages. Editorials often carry headlines which contain orders and summons: "Broaden the mass basis of youth consecrations" or "Increase harvesting teams", or, Czech, "zvysovat hektorove vynosy" -- "Increase yield per hectare". These agitatorial sentences in the infinitive, patterned after the Russian are very characteristic. One could say: in the Western press style the mania for using nouns tends to make abstract concepts of facts; in the Soviet area the press has a different task. It does not challenge the capacity for abstraction, but the Soviet exhortative style drums and agitates, it aims at the behavior of the reader. The behavior must be activated. This appeal to the behavior of the reader is an important factor for the understanding of Soviet thought control, as we shall see later. In this lies an essential difference between the Eastern and Western press.

"Noun-itis" is widespread in Soviet usage as well, but here it seems to have a special meaning. Just as occidental sociology abounds in abstract terms, so does Marxist social science. But while Max Weber or Simmel try to use nouns which do not carry any value judgment, in Soviet "noun-itis", ideological formulas are used and spread in a literal and specifically evaluating way (such as "partiality", "conciliatoriness"). These are used especially by writers who want to show off their ideological training. Often several genitive cases depending upon one another are strung up, which is just as typical as it is bad and clumsy usage.

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b) Language as a fighting tool for the new communization. The slogan "Language - a fighting tool" comes from Stalin. This means that language is a revolutionary tool for communization. Usually language is considered a means for understanding and communication, but in this connection that would not be sufficient. Language is, so to speak, a tool for communization. Whoever does not speak a certain language stands outside of the community which speaks this language. Whoever does not speak the language of Communism, be it in the German, Polish, Czech, Latvian, Hungarian, or other tongue, is automatically out. The use of Communist terminology is an identification card which shows that one belongs, just as a hunter or miner proves to be a member of his profession by using the vocabulary of the hunter's or miner's language. But, most important, the exclusive effect is automatic. Thus Wolfgang Leonhard, in his well-known book Die Revolution entlässt ihre Kinder (The Revolution Lets its Children Go) tells the following: "When you use the word "Cominform" you are immediately branded as a warmonger." This term, he explains, is only used by Western agencies. In the Soviet area, the full term "Communist Information Bureau" must be used. A Berliner who speaks of the "Soviet Sector" of the city reveals himself as pro-Western, for the official Soviet use is "Democratic sector". The use of a word can become a warrant for arrest. This distinction between friend and foe on the basis of linguistic usage is reminiscent of the well-known shibboleth story from the Old Testament.

We shall not go more deeply into the Soviet party jargon, because what interests us here is the extent and the way in which Soviet language modifications are effective. This may be demonstrated by the extensive use of foreign words.

c) Effectiveness of foreign words. The peculiar abundance of foreign words from the international, and especially Latin, vocabulary shows especially clearly the role of language as a "membership card". Isn't it a strange contradiction that the Communist Party from the very beginning used the special language of the humanistically educated westerner to appeal to just those social strata in Russia which are farthest away from such an education, that is, the workers and farmers.

This must first of all be understood historically, from the point of view of the belief in authority. Lenin still had the idea that the languages of the world could gradually be developed into a proletarian world language by the absorption of international expressions. This was a requirement for world revolution. This task was accorded to the Russian language only by Stalin, who declared it the "language of world revolution". An editorial in Pravda of 7 July 1938 says: "Russian will become the international language of socialist culture, just as Latin was for the top layer of early medieval society, and as French was in the 18th and 19th century." Stalin's linguistic letters (Marxism and Questions of Linguistics, 1950) which also deals with

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this topic, have a slightly different view of the problem of a world language. The basis for the Soviet love of foreign words which has been taken over by all countries influenced by the Soviets is the precise, ritual belief in the meaning of the word, which will transmit the words of Marxist authorities with exact precision. This could be compared to the scholastic belief in the word as practiced in the middle ages. It is true, though, that the terms of the experts in Soviet culture penetrate only slowly into the literary and everyday language.

There is an additional factor. The foreign word stands outside of the vocabulary of the mother tongue and can therefore not be checked by the individual. Therefore, such words can be used everywhere in the exact meaning accorded to them by the Marxist ideologists. This meaning can even be forced upon them. I was told about a "progressive" Slovak priest who was asked by a candidate for confirmation about the meaning of "Communism". The priest explained that words like "communion" and "communicant" contain an avowal of Communism. How could a child speaking only Slovak dispute or resolve such a play on words? (plays on words are a favorite means of demagogical thought control. See for example Ulbricht: "We are proposing a one-party list because we are all one" from Ostbrief (Eastern letter), 3, 1957, p. 325.) Thus, the Soviet foreign word which is understood in the same way everywhere, unites specifically the inner circle, that is the comrades in the Soviet language; it is a pattern which can be used supra-nationally. Thus the special terms become symbols, like our number formulas or the Chinese ideograms which can be used independently of the mother tongue. Not the classical meaning, but the Communist ideological meaning determines understanding. In this sense, it is better to say "progressive" than "forward-looking", as shown in a slip which occurred in an advertisement, "Need a forward-looking messenger immediately" (Leipziger Volkszeitung (Leipzig People's Newspaper)). In the Polish press I have noted the foreign word "verification", a specific expression which means "eliminating unreliable elements from the party".

Just as the use of foreign words proves the comrades-in-language to belong to the ideologically educated upper layer, thus uniting them, a foreign term can occasionally be used cleverly in foreign politics. This is true, for instance, of the word "coexistence" which in 1948 occurred first in diplomatic language, then in the press, and finally in common usage. For the westerner with a classical education it is evident that the word is composed from Latin "con" - "together with" (as in congruence, convict, contact, etc.) and "exist", so that the word would mean something like "balance of powers". However, in the Soviet "front language", the meaning is quite different: coexistence here means -- as Stalin says in his Grundlagen des Leninismus (Foundations of Leninism, 11th edition of German edition, Moscow 1946, p. 79) -- "to gain time for breaking up the enemy and for rallying our forces for the attack".

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We would have to investigate the origin of the Russian term for "coexistence" (sosushchestvovaniye). Compare use for Stalin of "Vdokhnovitel," ("inspirer", "instigator").

Foreign words are eminently suited to the concealment of facts, as the following example will show. What we objectively call the "revolt of Poznan" was rendered in the press of the German Soviet Zone in a cliché containing many foreign words as "the provocation of Poznan, a provocative diversionistic action which has been in preparation for a long time". Such a cliché of foreign words is indeed ideologically exact and can therefore be understood and used anywhere from Turkistan to Cuba.

The example of the Poznan revolt leads us to the expansion or deflection of terms along a certain ideological line, but this involves a special problem which is too extensive to be treated here. We shall only indicate it in the use of the term "revolt". In the West this is a neutral term, which formerly, especially in the sense of "revolution", had a strongly negative connotation. In the East, however, the word has acquired a positive sense in being limited to revolts by the people which fit in with today's Communist policies or with the Marxist-Leninist interpretation of history. Whoever has gone to school in a Communist country takes over the value of this word, even when he believes that he is not a Communist, and thereby his thoughts are influenced in a certain direction. Examples of such narrowing or deflection of a term could be given in any number.

Another interesting example of the mania for foreign words: In Slovakia there is at this time a great deal of discussion about a "democratization" of Slovak orthography. Up to 1939, Slovak was under strong pressure from the Czech language, and then up to 1945 under pressure of separating from the Czech, and now it is supposed to go along with the international standards of socialism. For, as they say, "linguistic purism is a child of separatistic anti-Czech nationalism, of the treacherous regime of the People's Party". Finally, a voice from East Berlin: "To cleanse Marxist literature of foreign words would mean to water it down."

d) The word becomes a "Signal". The Soviet mania for foreign words shows two things: 1., the foreign word which has been given an ideologically precise meaning is an excellent means for the international control of the masses. 2., the knowledge of foreign words with Marxist ideological meanings makes a community out of the leaders of Soviet Marxism all over the world. The use of words is in reality an image worship. We see that something which is essential to every language appears in an exaggerated form, for language is a symbolic form of recognition. Each word is an image or sign. The meaning of the sign has to be learned in order to understand and speak. This aspect of language, which rests on convention, is what the Soviets have overemphasized and exaggerated. Thus a stranger occasionally does not understand at all the meaning of an Eastern slogan in its extreme formulation. What could be the meaning, for

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instance, of the slogan on a Czech streamer, "Za masovost nasi televychovy" (for the massification of our physical education) What is the meaning of the German slogan "Organize a mass initiative for the fulfillment of the plan for producing progeny"? Are we supposed to mass-produce children?!

We see then that the normative exaggeration of the symbolic character of a word turns the Soviet ideological words into characterizing marks, they become "signals"! The knowledge or ignorance of such signals includes or excludes a person as far as the community is concerned.

e) The authoritative control of linguistic usage. Since the specific meaning of the word carrying an ideological content cannot be immediately understood and is not absorbed by the linguistic community spontaneously, the statement must be controlled and propagated by authority. Thus the image worship becomes a word cult, the cult of authoritative statements. The following may serve as an example: In an interview of 17 February 1952, Stalin coined the slogan "defend peace to the utmost". The newspaper Das neue Deutschland (The New Germany) reproduced this sentence on 18 May literally, although in a different connection. In the beginning of June the sentence occurred in a letter from Pieck, and at the end of June it appeared in a declaration by the President of the People's Chamber, and so on. The authoritative control of language is an expression of the "revolution from above" which Stalin declared a legitimate new thesis of Marxism in his well-known work Marxism and Linguistic Problems.

There is no railway car from Warsaw or Bukharest to Vladivostok which does not contain pictures and admonishing statements by Marxist leaders. There is no school or office, from the Crimea to Arkhangelsk, where the new vocabulary is not propagated and pounded in by slogans and announcements.

This need not be discussed any further here. The eschatological belief in a happier future is suggestively, even demoniacally expressed in the cry "Skoro budet luchshe!" (It will soon be better!). The belief in the future of the Soviet citizen can hardly be expressed more succinctly than with this slogan. In this connection we would like to mention the book by the Leipzig philosopher Bloch about hope (1957). The Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung (Frankfurt General Gazette) criticized the book, stating that the German word hope always contains a factor of insecurity. This is not entirely correct, it is only true for the vernacular, as in "Hoping and waiting makes a fool of many a one". In philosophical terminology, however, hope and fear are contrasts, and even more so in theological terminology, where "hope" means confidence, surety, security... This is especially true of the Russian word "nadeyat'sya" (to hope) which carries with it the meaning of "to rely upon, to build upon, to trust". This is the root of Bloch's thesis and of the meaning of the word hope as he sees it: in the Soviet Russian it means the absolute belief that

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the future of the world will belong to Communism with the certainty almost of a law of nature.

The Soviet doctrine of "the right word at the right time in the right place" is protected by the appeal to the fear in man, fear of those police institutions which Europe had learned to fear during the inquisition. An example: a rule which to us seems to be a small point of grammar led in Moscow to the condemnation of an entire Russian grammar text. In demonstrating the so-called "soft stop" in the Russian alphabet, the author had chosen the words "pyat'" (five) and "p'yan" (drunk). He wanted to show that in the one case the sign is written, but not in the other. A political editor criticized this. Why? When hearing "five", every Soviet citizen thinks of the illustrious Five-Year Plan, and therefore this word must not be used together with a word for "drunk" (see Rshevskiy, Yazyk i totalitarizm, (Language and Totalitarianism), 1951, p. 19). Even a numeral can be a "signal" for something else and may be considered as such. Thereby the numeral "five" becomes sacrosanct, inviolable. The political editor is the censor who watches over Lenin's "biological selection" in the linguistic process.

An interesting proof of the effect of the patterned speaking and thinking upon man, of the effect of image worship and word cult, is given in the above-mentioned book by W. Leonhard, who had gone to school in Russia and must know what he is talking about. He says "This way of thinking was so firmly established in everyone, including myself, that for many years I simply could not conceive of any other way of thinking." Nothing can be added to this, except maybe the words of Ponomarenko after his flight to the West "It is a strange feeling for me to speak exactly as I think". (Posev (Sowing), 26 January 1958).

Can "Control by Means of Language" be Explained?

What is it that lies at the base of political control of the language which makes it suitable for influencing people, even for leading the masses? Where begins the demoniac element of language? It seems incomprehensible that man should follow these suggestions against his own better knowledge.

a) The linguistic function of "response" and "behavioristic research". Every advertising expert knows that when some kind of merchandise, however unintelligible its name, is mentioned often enough over the radio during the morning advertisements, the sales rise in the afternoon. Or, another example: the press reports that recently a Chinese peace fighter had thunderous applause during a speech which he held in East Berlin in the Chinese language. It was of no importance that no one could understand the Chinese words of the speaker. The topic of "peace" which was well-known to the masses, was sufficient to create an oratorical success. The words acted only as signals, to elicit certain reactions. It is this effect of the language which we must consider, without discussing

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whether the applause, which pertains to the cult of mass assembly, was organized in the above case or not (see W. Richter, Europa-Archiv 8, 1953, column 6053 ff).

To elicit a certain response is another function of language besides the function of communication and communization. The function of eliciting response is even more important than the other two functions when language is considered as an advertising medium, that is, it is being used as a means of leading and controlling. Words, even when not understood, then elicit certain types of behavior. In order to answer our question, we must therefore consider the so-called behavioristic research, as developed in Russia by Pavlov and in Germany by Konrad Lorenz.

Behavioristic research shows that the response function of language seems to reach the biological depths of human existence, down into the animalic basis. In order to explain this, let us briefly consider the work of Konrad Lorenz. Lorenz observed, for instance, the behavior of jackdaws. He noticed that a jackdaw promptly rushed out as soon as a young one signalled distress by flapping its wings. Formerly one would have said by way of explanation "Ah, maternal instinct" in analogy to human behavior. But another experiment proved this to be wrong. The jackdaws came rushing out just the same when Lorenz had his black bathing trunks flapping in the wind. Lorenz concluded that the dummy had the same effect on the jackdaws as had the original.

From these and many other observations -- we would like to mention especially the famous example of Pavlov's dogs -- we learn: As in the example of the jackdaws, the impressions of "black" and "flapping" are sufficient to start an automatic response mechanism; in the animal world in general there exist models of reaction based on heredity, a fixed "program of reactions", as Lorenz calls it. Only a very few characteristics serve as triggers for the reaction, for the animal is dependent on the limitations of its environment; nothing else exists for it.

These indications must be sufficient for now. Let us keep in mind that there is on the one hand a biological program of behavior, and on the other, a signal system with compulsory reactions.

Let us now transfer these indications to the language problem. A part of man's behavior is analogous to that of animals in that it is triggered by a mechanism which elicits a specific reaction. Consider, for instance, the reaction of man to the words "weed" and "useful plant". Weeds may be or must be eradicated, while useful plants must be spared. Seen objectively, this difference does not exist in nature. But the language makes a difference and thereby controls human behavior. The well-known linguist Leo Weisgerber quite rightly speaks of a "median world of language" which governs the recognition of reality. When characterizing an object by giving it a name, a value judgment is given at the same time, that is, human behavior is analogous to moral behavior, as we say. Animals have a fixed program of behavior, but man has the freedom of choice

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between possibilities. An amusing example may illustrate this: A teacher took his class on a hike, and when they approached a restaurant, he said "Let's pause here!" Promptly everyone cried out "Yes, we are thirsty, we want Coca Cola!" The ever-repeated advertisement "The pause that refreshes! Drink Coca-Cola" was the trigger for the thirst of his class, the teacher explained.

Now my point is becoming clearer: When human freedom of behavior is controlled linguistically, it becomes narrowed down and approaches the behavior program of animals, which is absolute and functions schematically, the more the expressive character of the word solidifies into a signal system.

b) The Function of the Adjective as a "Characteristic". The pattern of behavior "weeds -- useful plants" has a surprising analogy in a certain principle of Soviet speech control and mass guidance. As is well-known, political behavior is essentially determined by the manner in which adverse or friendly tendencies are seen. The relationship friend-foe is the determining factor in political behavior, as we say today. This love-hate factor is quite consciously used by the Soviet leaders in their language control. The Soviet Russian speech patterns as political weapons are either exaggerated positively or branded with a negative meaning. There is only black or white, only weed and useful plant! For such a distinction the use of adjectives is especially suitable, used in a praising or blaming sense together with a certain concept. For instance, one must not speak objectively of "the days of Tsarism", but there must be a value judgment like "in the bloody days of Tsarism" or "in the dark ages of Tsarist absolutism". Other examples of thought control by attributives are "bright future" instead of "future"; or poetic patterns such as "the bright day of socialism" as against the "dark night of fascism"; or activist pairs of words form patterns: "tempestuous development" as against the "progressing decadence of the rotting bourgeois culture". Especially interesting are the intriguing adjectival labels which are deceptive, ambivalent or ambiguous, such as "progressive" (= Communist), "scientific" (= Marxist), "formalistic", "idealistic", "biased", etc. The harmless appertaining adjectives of the type "medical", "industrial" carry within them an evaluative chief meaning which is either positive or negative and stems from the Communist ideology. But this value judgment cannot be seen formally from the neutral formation of the word. We have met the same ambiguity in the terms "coexistence" and "revolt".

Occasionally, amusing sentences result from this, such as "the genius of Lenin showed the way to utilizing peat for electric power plants". Later on the noun can be used without its attributive adjective, after the desired dialectical meaning of the noun has become firmly established. Thus a number of -isms have a negative sense, such as "formalism", "cosmopolitanism", etc. The attributive is a visible sign and a tool of the Leninist demand for linguistic selection.

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A new edition of the textbook, The History of the CPSU has appeared recently (Moscow 1959). Instead of Stalin, Nikita Khrushchev is here celebrated as the hero of the civil war. Therefore the grades, that is the adjectives, had to be redistributed for the names of the chief figures, and the choice of attributives and adjectives, often with delicate shades of meaning, must have meant a tight-rope walk for the collective group of editors, as a critic sees it.

c) Result. An intoxicating abundance of attributives, expressed or unexpressed, characterizes concepts, and thus controls the thought and behavior of man. Thus the analogy to animal behavior is evident. For the adjectives, which have been defined grammatically quite correctly and pertinently as "characterizing words" do contribute the characteristics, and this furnishes the link to what Lorenz has said about the behavior program of animals: "A very few characteristics function as triggers". The behavior of the jackdaw, which is triggered by "black" and "flapping", is dependent on the limited characteristics of its jackdaw environment.

Similarly we can conclude: to use language as a means of mass guidance and thought control is possible because the Soviet control of the language appeals to the collective, archetypal subconscious in the human soul, to the behavior which lies beyond personal experience, beyond personal perception, evaluation, and recognition. Dialectics, image worship and word cult make it possible for man to orient himself by a limited system of characteristics and signals, which frees him from making an individual judgment. Essentially this is an activation of the collective mass behavior. The Soviet linguistic controls doubtlessly fulfill their purpose. They control the political behavior within their sphere of influence, and they furnish camouflage for foreign policy, because the constitutions of the Soviet Union and those of the Western democracies use in part the same terms.

Control of opinion by means of linguistic control threatens to lead to a reverse Babylonian confusion of languages. It is a tragedy. In those days after the building of the tower of Babel, men scattered and could not understand each other any longer because the same things acquired different names, as legend has it. Today people of the East and West misunderstand each other because different things have the same name. The misunderstanding between East and West is in a large part the tragic result of purposeful thought control by means of the word.