Poetry & Political Language

A teacher resource pack by The Poetry Society & The Orwell Foundation

“Political language — and with variations this is true of all political parties, from Conservatives to Anarchists — is designed to make lies sound truthful and murder respectable, and to give an appearance of solidity to pure wind.”
– George Orwell, ‘Politics and the English Language’ (1946)

Introduction
This lesson plan explores political language and poetry. It is designed to accompany the teaching of George Orwell’s Animal Farm and assumes a working knowledge of the plot, but can also be used as a standalone resource about political language. The activities ask students to identify techniques used in political language, and to write their own poems exploring and satirising political language.

Structure
The lesson plan consists of a warm-up exercise and three activity sheets. Activity sheets 1 and 2 focus on the Orwellian background, and activity sheet 3 asks students to write their own poems using political language. These sheets include quotations from Orwell’s essay ‘Politics and the English Language’ (which you can read in full on the Orwell Foundation website) and Animal Farm.

Activity sheet 1 asks students to examine Orwell’s definition of euphemism, and create their own euphemistic phrases.

Activity sheet 2 asks students to identify some techniques used politically by the pig Squealer in Animal Farm, and to re-write Squealer’s speech from the perspective of a real person in power.

Activity sheet 3 looks at ‘couplings’, a new poetic form which combines found poetry with an extension of the writer’s own poetic voice. Selected activities can be used in a single session, or the whole resource can be used over a series of sessions.
This resource was created as part of the Young Poets Network writing challenge about political language, in partnership with the Orwell Youth Prize. You can find more prompts and ideas on Young Poets Network, and the competition is open until midnight, Sunday 25 October 2020. Winning poets will be published on The Poetry Society’s website, and receive poetry books, an exclusive Young Poets Network notebook and more. New writing challenges are uploaded regularly – check back for more.

Warm-up exercise
Split students into small groups and ask them to define the terms ‘political language’ and ‘propaganda’. To structure the discussion, feed them the following questions one by one, giving them time to come up with an answer. Afterwards, discuss as a class. There are no right or wrong answers!

• Do they have positive, negative or neutral associations with these words?
• Is there a difference between the two terms, and if so, what is it? Can they think of an example of each?
• Can they think of some techniques used by ‘political’ or propaganda writers?
• What kinds of people use political language and propaganda?
• Why do these people use language in this way?

It might be helpful to remind them that language can be ‘political’ outside government – you can also find political language on social media, in the news, and in books like Animal Farm.

The following may help to inform the class discussion. Do they want to change their answers after hearing these quotations and techniques?

• ‘In our time, political speech and writing are [...] the defence of the indefensible... political language has to consist largely of euphemism, question-begging and sheer cloudy vagueness’ – George Orwell, ‘Politics and the English language’
• Propaganda is defined by philosopher Randal Marlin as, ‘The organized attempt through communication to affect belief or action or inculcate [instil] attitudes in a large audience in ways that circumvent or suppress an individual’s adequately informed, rational, reflective judgment.’
• Some techniques for both include: short and snappy slogans, repetition, wordplay, rhythm and rhyme, buzzwords, scaremongering, euphemism, rhetorical questions, logical fallacies, appealing to listeners’ emotions, misinformation, confusion, avoiding the question – can your students think of others?

First edition of George Orwell’s Animal Farm, published by Secker and Warburg in 1945.
Politics and the English Language

In his essay ‘Politics and the English Language’, George Orwell argued that political language had become detached from reality:

“...In our time, political speech and writing are largely the defence of the indefensible. Things like the continuance of British rule in India, the Russian purges and deportations, the dropping of the atom bombs on Japan, can indeed be defended, but only by arguments which are too brutal for most people to face, and which do not square with the professed aims of political parties. Thus political language has to consist largely of euphemism, question-begging and sheer cloudy vagueness. Defenceless villages are bombarded from the air, the inhabitants driven out into the countryside, the cattle machine-gunned, the huts set on fire with incendiary bullets: this is called pacification. Millions of peasants are robbed of their farms and sent trudging along the roads with no more than they can carry: this is called transfer of population or rectification of frontiers. People are imprisoned for years without trial, or shot in the back of the neck or sent to die of scurvy in Arctic lumber camps: this is called elimination of unreliable elements. Such phraseology is needed if one wants to name things without calling up mental pictures of them. [...] A mass of Latin words falls upon the facts like soft snow, blurring the outlines and covering up all the details. The great enemy of clear language is insincerity. When there is a gap between one’s real and one’s declared aims, one turns as it were instinctively to long words and exhausted idioms, like a cuttlefish spurting out ink.”

Underline the four euphemisms Orwell specifies. From this passage, can you define what a ‘euphemism’ is?

In groups, discuss:

• Do you agree with Orwell? He was writing this in the 1950s. Is this how language is being used today?
• Why do people use language in this way? List five situations where there might be ‘a gap between one’s real and one’s declared aims’.
• Can you think of a modern example of a euphemistic phrase like ‘pacification’ or ‘rectification of frontiers’? Write down what it really means, and why someone would use it.
• Can you invent some ‘political’ euphemisms for unpleasant situations? For instance, if you were a teacher, how could you phrase ‘I’m giving you six hours of homework due in tomorrow’ to cover up how horrible this might be? Come up with as many other examples as you can.
Below are some potential answers for Activity Sheet 1:

- Why do people use language in this way? List five situations where there might be ‘a gap between one’s real and one’s declared aims’.
  - When a politician has done something immoral but wants to carry on doing it, and keep the public’s trust to be re-elected
  - When an influencer has done something problematic but doesn’t want to give up their platform
  - When someone wants to win a debate, even if their points aren’t true
  - When someone or an organisation wants to virtue-signal i.e. publicly express an opinion designed to show them in a good light without following through (e.g. saying Black Lives Matter but not taking any action to reflect this)
  - When an employer wants to sack lots of employees they might call it ‘downsizing’
  - When an abuser wants to gas-light (psychologically manipulate) a victim

- Can you think of a modern example of a euphemistic phrase like ‘pacification’ or ‘rectification of frontiers’? Write down what it really means, and why someone would use it.
  - Alternative facts
  - Take back control
  - Stay alert
When the pigs start to take more food than the others, one of the pigs (Squealer) responds:

“Comrades!... You do not imagine, I hope, that we pigs are doing this in a spirit of selfishness and privilege? Many of us actually dislike milk and apples. I dislike them myself. Our sole object in taking these things is to preserve our health. Milk and apples (this has been proved by Science, comrades) contain substances absolutely necessary to the well-being of a pig. We pigs are brainworkers. The whole management and organisation of this farm depend on us. Day and night we are watching over your welfare. It is for YOUR sake that we drink that milk and eat those apples. Do you know what would happen if we pigs failed in our duty? Jones would come back! Yes, Jones would come back! Surely, comrades,” cried Squealer almost pleadingly, skipping from side to side and whisking his tail, “surely there is no one among you who wants to see Jones come back?”

How does Squealer manipulate the truth through using clever language? In groups, match the following techniques to the phrases in the table overleaf. A single quotation may use more than one technique. Beware, not all of the techniques are used! The terms with asterisks are defined overleaf.
Quotation | Techniques
--- | ---
You do not imagine, I hope, that we pigs are doing this in a spirit of selfishness and privilege? | 
Milk and apples (this has been proved by Science, comrades) contain substances absolutely necessary to the well-being of a pig. | 
Day and night we are watching over your welfare. | 
It is for YOUR sake that we drink that milk and eat those apples. | 
Do you know what would happen if we pigs failed in our duty? Jones would come back! Yes, Jones would come back! | 
Surely, comrades … surely there is no one among you who want to see Jones come back? | 

**Fallacy of the single cause:** when you assume there’s only one simple cause of an outcome, when in fact there may be many causes

**False dilemma:** when you only give two choices, when in reality there are more

**Appeal to motive:** dismissing an idea by questioning the motives of its proposer

**Slippery slope:** claiming that one small action will lead to a chain of many worse consequences, and therefore that the first action shouldn’t be taken

Can you think of any other techniques that Squealer uses?

**Re-write:**

Pick someone who currently has a lot of power, who is interested in keeping it or gaining more power. This could be a politician, a CEO of a social network or company, someone who owns a newspaper (etc.).

Imagine that person is being asked to give a speech defending an action they have taken which is controversial. Using Squealer’s speech as a template, write a speech for them, so that they can keep their power. Use as many techniques as you can to convince your audience.

For example, the head of a company might wish to play down the fact that their salary is £5,000,000 a year, while many people in their company are paid minimum wage. How will you frame it so their wage seems fair?
Below are some potential answers for Activity Sheet 2:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Quotation</th>
<th>Techniques</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>You do not imagine, I hope, that we pigs are doing this in a spirit of selfishness and privilege?</td>
<td>Rhetorical question, appeal to emotion (suggesting the animals are calling them selfish)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Milk and apples (this has been proved by Science, comrades) contain substances absolutely necessary to the well-being of a pig.</td>
<td>Appeal to science, exaggeration, red herring (this information is not relevant – and food is essential to the other animals’ well-being too)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Day and night we are watching over your welfare.</td>
<td>Exaggeration, red herring</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>It is for YOUR sake that we drink that milk and eat those apples.</td>
<td>Repetition and rhythm (it’s iambic – ‘we DRINK that MILK and EAT those APples’), fallacy of the single cause</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Do you know what would happen if we pigs failed in our duty? Jones would come back! Yes, Jones would come back!</td>
<td>Rhetorical question, exaggeration, euphemism (what is their ‘duty’?), slippery slope, repetition, appeal to fear</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Surely, comrades … surely there is no one among you who wants to see Jones come back?</td>
<td>Rhetorical question, repetition, appeal to emotion (calling them ‘comrades’), false dilemma, appeal to motive, slippery slope</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
In 2017, the poet Malika Booker (see right) was commissioned by Manchester Literature Festival and the Royal Literary Fund to write new poems responding to current affairs.

Malika chose four speeches made by prominent politicians in 2016 and 2017 as her subject, and composed a series of ‘couplings’. This coupling uses fragments of politician Nigel Farage’s 4am victory speech after the EU Referendum in 2016.

What is a coupling?
A ‘coupling’ is a new poetic form created by another poet, Karen McCarthy Woolf (below, right). Here’s what Karen says that with this new poetic form:

“I wanted to integrate the two voices, but also to subvert or extend what the original writer was saying. The cadences of the original determined to some degree the tone of the new text. [...] The response line is intended to act as an asymmetric mirror of the original. You might have rhyme, assonance, repetition, or a variation. [...] The ‘coupling’ is a response to both prose poems and found poems – and to my own experience as a Jamaican-English hybrid Londoner. I think the impulse to unify seemingly disparate parts is part of a larger poetic.”
Malika Booker
That Force-ripe Morning

Dare to dream that the dawn is breaking,
like cracked eggs in we sky, this force-ripe morning

on an independent United Kingdom
where crapo croak he song each morning,

this, if the predictions now are right, this will be a victory
grabbed like flies snatched with fork tongue flickering

for real people, a victory for ordinary people, a victory
where ho who puffed up his puny chest, will deflate

decent people. We have fought against the multinationals, we
No he who croak loud loud will crawl backwards, still preaching.

We have fought against the big merchant banks, we have fought
No he, with forked tongue, who lay eggs in fresh water to float will drown

against big politics, we have fought against lies, corruption and deceit.
No he who said dare to dream that the dawn is breaking, will break out of

Honesty, decency and belief in nation, I think
he will slink out into the night, his sweet water soured.

Printed with the permission of the poet and Manchester Literature Festival.
A ‘coupling’ is a poetic form invented by the contemporary poet Karen McCarthy Woolf. It is composed of couplets. In the first line, the poet includes an italicised fragment of a ‘found’ (already-existing) text, such as an article, letter or speech; in the second line, the writer continues that sentence or phrase in their own voice. The poem continues with alternating voices like this, using the same text. McCarthy Woolf says that with this new poetic form, I wanted to integrate the two voices, but also to subvert or extend what the original writer was saying. The cadences of the original determined to some degree the tone of the new text. … The response line is intended to act as an asymmetric mirror of the original. You might have rhyme, assonance, repetition, or a variation. … The “coupling” is a response to both prose poems and found poems – and to my own experience as a Jamaican-English hybrid Londoner. I think the impulse to unify seemingly disparate parts is part of a larger poetic.

You can read more about Karen’s process, and see her original coupling poem, here.

In the third and final activity sheet, students will look at a coupling written by another poet, Malika Booker. Inspired by McCarthy Woolf, Booker created a series of couplings for a commission in 2017 from Manchester Literature Festival and the Royal Literary Fund. The poem, ‘That Force-ripe Morning’, is printed in full on the activity sheet.

With one person reading the italics and one person reading the other lines, have two students read out loud ‘That Force-ripe Morning’. The italics are fragments of politician Nigel Farage’s 4am victory speech after the EU Referendum in 2016. The poem blends Farage’s political language with Booker’s ironic responses in Creole. (For an extension activity, or another example, another good choice is Booker’s ‘Divorce Proceedings’, on the same webpage, which samples a speech by former Prime Minister Theresa May.)

Encourage the students to discuss ‘That Force-ripe Morning’, considering the following points:

• What political techniques are used in the italicised sections? What kind of language is used in the un-italicised lines?
• Underline all the nouns and the verbs in the poem. What do they notice about the kind of words being used? The verbs are strong and concrete in both voices. But the nouns are different. Booker’s are more concrete and tangible (‘cracked eggs’, ‘forked tongue’, ‘dawn’) whereas Farage’s are more abstract (‘lies, corruption and deceit’, ‘big politics’) – they are euphemisms. What is the effect of contrasting these different kinds of nouns?
• Why has the poet chosen to write in Creole to respond to Nigel Farage’s speech? How can the students use their own voices and language when writing their poems?
• What is the tone of the poem? What does Malika Booker want to say with this poem? What do the students want to say with their own poems, and who do they want to set right?
Tell the students this is a new poetic form called a ‘coupling’, which was invented a few years ago by a mixed race Caribbean-British poet called Karen McCarthy Woolf. Ask them if they can figure out how this form works, based on reading this poem. The structure they should identify is:

- A poem made of couplets
- Line one: an italicised quotation from a ‘found’ (already-existing) text, such as an article, letter or speech
- Line two: the writer continues in their own voice, finishing the phrase or thought
- Repeat!

Ask the students to discuss why the poet has written the poem in this way – what can they convey using this structure that they couldn’t say otherwise? Direct their attention to the McCarthy Woolf quotation. What does it tell us about the origin of the ‘coupling’? Why are the words ‘subversive’ and ‘asymmetric mirror’ important in McCarthy Woolf’s explanation, and how might they shed light on ‘That Force-ripe morning’?

Students will then write their own couplings, either in class or for homework. They could choose sections of Animal Farm, or (ideally) they will be encouraged to research a ‘political’ or powerful figure and respond to something they have written or said, using their own voice and their own language. This could be the person they chose when re-writing Squealer’s speech (see Activity sheet 2), or someone else. They should choose a text that they don’t agree with, which they can ironise or satirise through the coupling form. They should not try to write in a ‘poetic’ way, but to use language they might use when talking with friends. Fire emojis are to be encouraged (within reason). When editing, they should try to make sure their verb and noun choices are strong, concrete and visual. They don’t have to decide what they want to say before they start writing, but they must know what the poem’s message is before they hand the poem back to you. Remind them to italicise the quotations and to always credit their sources!

Remember to submit your students’ poems to the Young Poets Network challenge by 26 October 2020, or the Foyle Young Poets of the Year Award which opens in March and closes on 31 July every year.