Politics is quintessentially a linguistic activity, an activity in which language is employed to inform others about political issues and persuade them to adopt courses of action in regard to these issues. However, numerous thinkers have supposed that language is more than just the vehicle for the expression of political views. As the political scientist Murray Edelman (1974) said, language is “not simply an instrument for describing events but [is] itself a part of events” (p. 4). According to this view, the language used to describe political events can influence political perceptions in a way that goes beyond its propositional content. The net effect can be a subtle, largely covert influence of language on political perceptions.¹

George Orwell (1948) seems to have been the first to suggest that political language can exert a significant, unconscious influence on political thought. In his novel, Nineteen Eighty-Four, Orwell described a totalitarian society, Oceania, in which language was used as an instrument of political repression. The tyrants of Oceania took the line that only those thoughts that can be formulated in language are thinkable and, therefore, it should be possible to restrict the range of things that are thinkable by restricting the range of things that are sayable. In an attempt to restrict the citizenry’s capacity to think politically heretical thoughts, Oceania’s tyrants restricted the English language so as to make such thoughts unexpressible.

Orwell’s Thesis

Orwell’s thesis—the thesis that political language can covertly influence political thought—has a strong and a weak form. The strong form is that political language can determine political thought. This seems to be the view that Orwell was presupposing in his novel. Orwell’s thesis might be taken to be something like a corollary of what is called the Whorf hypothesis or Sapir-Whorf hypothesis in

¹Recall the discussion in Chapter 1 of the language that is available for referring to the poor for an example of this influence. Other examples will be given later.
linguistics and anthropology. On the dependence of thought on language, Sapir (1921, p. 15) wrote that "thought may be no more conceivable, in its genesis and daily practice, without speech than is mathematical reasoning practicable without the lever of an appropriate mathematical symbolism." The Sapir-Whorf hypothesis is, then, that thought is dependent on language and, further, since languages differ grammatically and lexically, people who speak different languages will differ in how they conceive the world.

As we shall see momentarily, the thesis that all thought depends on language is not true. However, there is good reason to suppose that language does make practicable higher level cognitions such as those that are central to mathematics, science, the law, economics, politics, and the like. It does not, however, follow from the thesis that mathematics, physics, economics, or politics would not exist in the absence of a suitable natural language that the kind of mathematics, physics, economics, or politics we have is determined by these languages.

The evidence that exists concerning the relationship between language and thought suggests that they are separate, but interrelated capacities. As Lenneberg (1967) has noted, deaf children not exposed to any language, including sign language, exhibit cognitive development in their play. A second argument against the thesis that the form and character of thought is dependent on language might be based on the fact that, as Berlin and Kay (1969) and others have shown, there appears to be a universal set of focal colors, and although different languages have different numbers of what are called "basic" color terms, ranging from as few as 2 to as many as 11, the color terms that languages have roughly correspond to these focal colors. Therefore, if a language has 2 color words, these will refer to dark and light or black and white. If the language has 3 color terms, then the third will be that for red. If there are 4, then the fourth will be that for green or yellow. If 5, then the fifth will be that for green if the fourth was that for yellow or yellow if the fourth was that for green. And so on. These similarities between languages do not support Sapir-Whorf hypothesis because they can only be accounted for in terms of our apparently universal perceptual apparatus (von Wattenwyl & Zollinger, 1979).

A third argument against the thesis that thought is wholly dependent on language is the fact that we have hosts of concepts for which we have no "fixed expressions," that is, no words or phrases which are known to most speakers of the language and are regularly used to refer to some class of things. Thus, we have

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2 A more complete quotation of Sapir's view can be found in Chapter 1.
3 Basic color terms of a language are: (a) the terms that come most quickly to mind when speakers are asked to name colors; (b) are not included within the designation of any other color term; and (c) are monomorphemic, etc. The basic color terms of English are white, black, red, green, yellow, blue, orange, pink, purple, brown, and gray.
4 The notion of a "fixed expression" is due to Arnold Zwicky, who developed it in a course we once taught together. Fixed expressions are not idioms, but a crucial property of them is that they are idiomatic.