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**THE EXPRESSION AND REALISATION OF
POWER RELATIONSHIPS THROUGH LANGUAGE
IN MARGARET ATWOOD'S DYSTOPIAN NOVEL
*THE HANDMAID'S TALE***

MA thesis

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ABSTRACT

The aim of the present thesis is to demonstrate that the seemingly powerless Handmaids in Margaret Atwood's novel *The Handmaid's Tale* do have some power over the seemingly powerful members of the Gileadean society.

The introduction provides a brief discussion of the influence of George Orwell's fiction on Margaret Atwood's dystopian novel *The Handmaid's Tale*, the background of *The Handmaid's Tale* and the main features of dystopian fiction.

The first chapter, which forms the theoretical part of the thesis, is based on Pierre Bourdieu's theorising of the relationship between language and power in his *Language and Symbolic Power*, and on George Orwell's *Nineteen Eighty-Four*.

The second chapter, the empirical part of the thesis, focuses on the dual power relationships in *The Handmaid's Tale*, as the arbitrary nature of the binary opposition of the powerful/powerless is best exemplified by the dual power relationships between Offred and her Commander and between Offred and the Commander's Wife. These relationships are discussed in greater detail in separate subchapters.

The conclusion summarises the main ideas of the thesis.

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LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

As undated archive materials have been used in the present thesis, the following abbreviations have been adopted in the referencing system:

BA – Atwood, Margaret. n.d. *The Handmaid's Tale* – Before and After. Typewritten manuscript. Atwood Papers.

GO – Atwood, Margaret. n.d. George Orwell: Some Personal Connections. Typewritten manuscript. Atwood Papers.

HT – Atwood, Margaret. n.d. *The Handmaid's Tale*. Typewritten manuscript. Atwood Papers.

Interview – An Interview with Margaret Atwood. n.d. Typewritten manuscript. Atwood Papers.

INTRODUCTION

Almost every society has its major narratives which can be told, retold and varied in the process of telling and retelling. Those narratives might not be only stories proper, but also all kinds of ritualised acts involving speech performed in certain circumstances, so that those participating in the act are familiar with the proceedings. As the totalitarian societies of Gilead in Margaret Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale* and of Oceania in George Orwell's *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, a significant source text for Atwood's novel, are highly institutionalised and have a very rigid system of necessarily imposed ritual acts, what they lack are the major narratives started by people themselves on their free will. These societies are lacking the stories that could be told and retold so that they could start living their own life in the course of telling. This is what the protagonists of *The Handmaid's Tale* and *Nineteen Eighty-Four* are trying to do in the circumstances where story-telling is either prohibited or strictly restricted – they are trying to articulate their own personal stories so that the next generations would get at least a glimpse of the society the story-teller was living in.

In addition to Offred's and Winston's stories being an account of history for the next generations in the novels, these stories are also forewarnings for the readers of today, alerting them to the precariousness of the democratic world order. The tendencies in the democratic societies that led to the imposition of the new totalitarian social order in *The Handmaid's Tale* and *Nineteen Eighty-Four* which Atwood and Orwell refer to and caution against are as present in the world today as they were at the time when the novels were written. A few of the many examples of those tendencies could include the rise of fundamentalism and theocracies and the existence as well as fear of extremist religious movements, problems with infertility and the cases of selling children, the disastrous effects of pollution, surfacing of cases where history has been re-written to suit the

ideology of the powers that be, the declaration of wars, the real reasons of which have been quite different from the ones presented to the public, and the increasing surveillance of individuals by the means of various technologies. This demonstrates that it does not matter that the novels were written approximately 20 and 50 years ago – the topics they discuss have not lost their relevance for the readers of today, moreover, some concerns have become even more real and threatening than they used to be.

The analysis of power relationships through language in Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale* in the present thesis is based on two texts, a literary and a theoretical one – George Orwell's *Nineteen Eighty-Four* and Pierre Bourdieu's *Language and Symbolic Power*. The reason why Orwell's *Nineteen Eighty-Four* has been chosen in the present thesis to introduce the significance of language and its relation to power in Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale* is that the two works have some important connections and similarities: firstly, Atwood has emphasised a great influence of Orwell's fiction on her own writing and especially on *The Handmaid's Tale*, secondly, both novels belong to the same genre of dystopian fiction, and thirdly, there is an important continuity between the emphasis on language in *Nineteen Eighty-Four* with its Newspeak and Doublethink, and a similar issue of using language as a tool to make people subjects of the new social order in *The Handmaid's Tale*. It is the comparative perspective with Orwell that allows an analysis of the intricacies of power relationships through language in Atwood's novel.

The influence of George Orwell's fiction and especially of his *Nineteen Eighty-Four* on Margaret Atwood's work has been considered to be evident and discussed by many critics, including Amin Malak, E. L. Doctorow, David Ketterer (Ingersoll 1993: 64) and Earl Ingersoll. In the following section Atwood's own views on her connections with Orwell's work will be discussed, which are based on the materials from Atwood Papers stored at the Thomas Fisher Rare Book Library of the University of Toronto, Canada.

Atwood herself has said that she grew up with George Orwell and first read *Animal Farm* when she was only nine years old (GO 1). According to her own words, she is “forever grateful to George Orwell for alerting [her] early to the danger flags [she’s] tried to watch out for since” (GO 1). Even as a child she noticed how the pigs in *Animal Farm* used language games and how they twisted the ideology of “All Animals Are Equal” to suit their own purposes by proclaiming that “All Animals Are Equal, but Some Are More Equal Than Others” (GO 2).

Similarly to Orwell, in the works of whom Atwood saw “insistence on the clear and exact use of language” (Atwood GO 8), Atwood has also been interested in words and language throughout her work, perceiving the word “as a potential trap” (Davey 1977, qtd. in Grace 1983: 4) and exploring and exploiting of the “dangerous power” of language (Grace 1983: 4). Namely, both authors put textuality in the foreground by having their protagonists become ‘writers’ in their own ways and start keeping a diary of a sort (Ingersoll 1993: 64). When in Oceania, where the use of Newspeak aims to make certain forms of thought impossible, but does allow the existence of written texts produced under strict control of the authorities, the act of writing a diary in Oldspeak is an act of rebellion against the ban of recording one’s own subjective version of history and of using the language creatively, then in Gilead, where the Handmaids are not allowed to read and write or express their thoughts even orally, the oral storytelling is as strong an act of rebellion against the rules of the society as the written one would be. By telling her story Offred demonstrates that she is able to take risks, find her voice and reconstruct the social order (Freibert 1988: 285, qtd. in Hogsette 1997: 264). Writing down her story would be even more hazardous, but for Offred even more powerful as she feels the power of the written word when she writes down the nonsense Latin phrase in the Commander’s study – “[t]he pen between my fingers is sensuous, alive almost, I can feel its power, the power of the

words it contains” (Atwood 1996: 196). The Commander also realises its power as he hesitates before giving the pen to Offred (Atwood 1996: 195).

After *Animal Farm* Orwell’s *Nineteen Eighty-Four* became an important book for Atwood a few years after it was published, and she read it first in high school and then again and again, as it was among her favourite books besides *Wuthering Heights* (GO 3). Atwood was deeply influenced by Orwell’s dystopia, as she has written:

The government of Airstrip One, Winston’s “country”, is brutal. The constant surveillance, the impossibility of speaking frankly to anyone, the looming, ominous figure of Big Brother, the regime’s need for enemies and wars – fictitious though both may be – which are used to terrify the people and unite them in hatred, the mind-numbing slogans, the distortions of language, the destruction of what has really happened by stuffing any record of it down the Memory Hole – these made a deep impression on me. Let me re-state that: they frightened the stuffing out of me. (GO 4-5)

Atwood has stated that Orwell became a direct model for her in the year 1984 when she began writing *The Handmaid’s Tale* (GO 6). “Historical Notes on the Handmaid’s Tale” at the end of Atwood’s novel owe a lot to “The Principles of Newspeak” in *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, as “[t]he parallels with Orwell’s essay on Newspeak should be evident” (GO 8). Atwood also believes that those who have accused Orwell of being pessimistic towards the future at the end of his novel are not right, since *Nineteen Eighty-Four* does not end with the words “[h]e loved Big Brother” (Orwell 2003: 297), but rather “with a note on Newspeak, which is written in the past tense, in standard English – which means that, at the time of writing the note, Newspeak is a thing of the past” (Hancock 1990: 217) and that “the regime has fallen, and that language and individuality have survived” (GO 6). Though Ingersoll points out that the fact that “The Principles of Newspeak” is in the past does not necessarily mean that the Republic of Oceania no longer exists (Ingersoll 1993: 71).

Atwood has written that when she first had an idea of writing a dystopian novel in 1981, she “felt like it was a very strange sort of book for [her] to be writing. Also, [she] was afraid people would think it was merely paranoid” (BA 1). For Atwood, the novel “began with the question, ‘what if?’” (BA 1). She has said that she

was tired of having people say, “It can’t happen here.” They were right only if you accepted their definition of “it.” “It” could mean Russian-style Communism, or Germany under Hitler. But what if we were looking at the wrong “it”? What if, while we were busy staring down the wolf at the door, another one was creeping over the back fence? (BA 1)

According to Atwood, *The Handmaid’s Tale* is one answer to these “what if’s” (BA 1).

It is about what happens when several trends meet. She mentions “the rise of right-wing fundamentalism as a political force, the decline in the Caucasian birth-rate /.../, and the rise in infertility and birth-defect rates, due /.../ to increased chemical-pollutant and radiation levels, as well as to sexually-transmitted diseases” (BA 1). Besides those “what if’s” and Orwell’s fiction, Atwood was also influenced by her travels in Iran and Afghanistan, her interest in military tactics, and, explicitly, by the Bible, which is also the source of the novel’s title. Namely, the ideology of the Republic of Gilead is firmly based on the story of Jacob in Genesis, which speaks about his two wives Rachel and Leah, and their two handmaids, whose purpose is to produce children for them (BA 2). Atwood has also mentioned an Old Dutch Cleanser box of the 1940s, which shows a woman with a face-concealing hat and a large stick, an image that became a model for the Handmaids’ costumes (BA 2). Last but not least, Atwood also satirises her ancestors, the Puritans, who came to America not for religious freedom and not to establish a democratic society. Atwood has said that a democratic society “wasn’t even a notion at that time. They were interested in a theocracy” (Dodson: 1997a: 97) similar to Iran, which would be ruled by religious leaders and would not tolerate any kind of dissidence within itself (Interview 5). What is more, similarly to the Handmaids, Puritan women were oppressed as well, because women were thought to be evil and sinful (Dodson 1997b: para 19). The totalitarian order of Gilead wants to make sure that women will not have any opportunities to commit an act of sin and therefore, similarly to the Puritan society of the 17th century, where women were “hunted down [as witches], caged, then annihilated” (Dodson 1997b: para 19), the Handmaids are also imprisoned and sent to the colonies when they do not fulfil their duty

to the society. Atwood has even dedicated the novel to Mary Webster, one of her Puritan ancestors, who was hanged as a witch, but survived the hanging and could go free (Howells 2005: 97).

According to what Atwood has written about her research for the novel, she kept a clippings file on various topics from “P.C.B. levels in polar bears to collective hangings in seventeenth-century England” (BA 2). Atwood Papers include a great number of newspaper clippings on various topics that have informed the writing of *The Handmaid’s Tale*. The material has been organized according to subject areas like Plastic Money, Toxic Wastes, AIDS, Birth Control, Infertility, Infant Deaths, Sexual Equality Threatened, Abortion, Surrogacy, Baby Stealing, Nazis, American Fight, Liberation Theology and Iran. Many of the clippings among Atwood Papers actually come from the time after the publication of the book, testifying to the relevance of the concerns raised in the novel. At the same time, Atwood’s reflections on the status of *The Handmaid’s Tale* after its publication reveal her mixed feelings about it, and the fear that her talent in forewarning, definitely a blessing, may have become a curse for her own writerly aspirations:

Despite the success of *The Handmaid’s Tale*, however, I sometimes wake up in the night with disturbing thoughts. *The Handmaid’s Tale* shows a future most women and most men would not find pleasant, to put it mildly. We write such books, I think, partly to chart where we might be going, and to see whether we want to go there, but what if this book is not a warning but a forecast? What if it’s more real than even I supposed? The way things are going in the world today, I’d be happy to have someone tell me my book was total improbable nonsense – and be right. (BA 3-4)

Quite a few newspaper clippings in Atwood Papers seem to confirm Atwood’s fears of her novel transforming from a piece of fiction into a prediction of a horrifying future or even a self-fulfilling prophecy. One of the most nightmarish articles entitled “Women forced to have babies” comes from July 1985 and concerns a scenario strikingly similar to the one in *The Handmaid’s Tale*, with the difference that allegedly, it has already become a reality in Romania. It says that “[h]ard-working women in Romania can now be fired from their jobs or even hauled away as common criminals for not bearing enough children! /.../

‘Persistent non-pregnancy’ will be considered a crime against the state unless a doctor submits an acceptable explanation for why the woman can’t do her patriotic duty” (O’Donovan 1985). An example of press coverage on surrogacy comes from *The Globe and Mail* from March 1987 and is entitled “Sociologist calls for probe of reproduction technology” (Fraser 1987: A12). There a doctor reports about surrogate childbearing arrangements being practiced in a legally grey area in Canada and criticizes the 1985 proposal of making surrogate childbearing legal (Fraser 1987: A12). There is yet another article from *The Evening Telegram* from October 1985 entitled “Charges of brain-washing. Catholics say cult taking over” that deals with a Roman Catholic religious sect in a suburb in Berkeley Heights, New Jersey, called People of Hope, which “subordinates its women, discourages social contact with non-members, arranges marriages and moves teenage disciples to ‘households’ for indoctrination” (Charges of brain-washing 1985). What is more – “[t]he wives of the coordinators are called ‘handmaidens’” (Charges of brain-washing 1985). Though these are only three examples of the hundreds of clippings stored among Atwood Papers, they strongly support Atwood’s argument that “there’s nothing in [*The Handmaid’s Tale*] we as a species have not done, aren’t doing now or don’t have the technological capability to do” (BA 2).

After the novel was published Atwood

braced [herself], clippings file at the ready, for the shouts of “paranoid,” “impossible,” and “ridiculous” that [she] was sure would arise. But few did. In [her] native Canada, response from media people was a nervous, “Could it happen here?” In England, the book was treated more as a good yarn than as social realism /.../. But in the United States, where these motifs were closer to home, they didn’t even use the word “could.” Instead it was, “How long have we got, and how can we prevent it?” /.../ Hardly anyone thought this scenario was entirely far-fetched. (BA 3)

This shows the difference of the societies and how they look at their own future. When in England people did not take the book’s scenario too seriously, since for an ancient kingdom it seemed too far-fetched to become true, then in the ever-changing superpower the United States of America, in the present geographical region of which Atwood has also

set her novel, it was a future one could really imagine and look out for. Canada itself, which is often considered too American for the Europeans and too European for the Americans rather remained in the safe position of wait-and-see.

Though many critics have considered *The Handmaid's Tale* a feminist dystopia, Atwood denies it by saying that writing a dystopia from a woman's point of view as a counterbalance to all the dystopias written earlier by men from men's point of view does not make it automatically a "feminist dystopia" (GO 7). She has said that she had not intended it to be read as a piece of feminist propaganda, as she was more interested in totalitarian systems than feminism (Hancock: 1990: 216). On one hand, *The Handmaid's Tale* does deal with a number of questions that are considered important from the point of view of feminism, on the other hand, Atwood has also said that she is mainly interested in the fate of humans in totalitarian circumstances, not necessarily of men and women separately.

Atwood's work has often been described in terms of duality or polarity (Grace 1983: 4). However, the oppositional categories that Atwood establishes in her oeuvre serve as a point of departure in the development of a character's black-and-white way of thinking towards a holistic view of the world, which takes the extremes into account, but does not stop there. Sherrill Grace states that "Atwood identifies human failure as acquiescence in those Western dichotomies which postulate the inescapable, static division of the world into hostile opposites: culture/nature, male/female, straight line/curved space, head/body, reason/instinct, victor/victim", and that instead, Atwood rather tries to find the dynamic third way (1983: 5) in order to break down the boundaries and overcome the "polarization of world and self, as well as the hierarchical power structures which such divisions produce" (Grace 1983: 7). Atwood aims at breaking the imprisoning circles where humans find themselves caught, not cancelling polarities altogether (Grace 1983: 13) and this

might also explain why she does not want *The Handmaid's Tale* to be read just as a feminist dystopia, but rather looked at from the holistic point of view and considered a novel about humans in the totalitarian social order, not necessarily about men and women. Coral Ann Howells has suggested that this novel is closer to “the new feminist scholarship which has moved beyond exclusively female concerns to a recognition of the complexities of social gender construction” (2005: 95). The emphasis on humans, not on women, is also confirmed in the empirical part of the thesis, where a closer look at the social conditions of the Republic of Gilead reveals that the people repressed by the new social order are not only women, but men as well. As Howells point out, “there are male bodies hanging every day on the Wall, while homosexuals, Roman Catholic priests and Quakers of both sexes are regularly executed, and male sexual activity is severely restricted as well” (2005: 95).

In addition, Atwood has also said that, “[d]espite its future setting, *The Handmaid's Tale* is not science fiction, if by that you mean Martians, teleportation, or life on Venus. Nor is it a sort of travelogue of the future. It's the story of one woman under this regime, told in a very personal way” (BA 2). The reader does not get to know about Gilead more than the protagonist does, and the information she has is limited and this lack of information is also part of the nightmare she lives in (Interview 7). However, Atwood calls this nightmare only “a slight twist on the society we have now” (Interview 3) and emphasises that she wanted the book to be firmly based on human nature and on things that the humans have done in the past, are doing in the present or might be doing in the future. This slight twist is also one of the central features of the genre of dystopian fiction as a whole, discussed in greater detail in the following part of the introduction, which looks at the relationship of the notions of science fiction and dystopia, and outlines the most important features of dystopia in order to situate Atwood's novel in the larger context of dystopian fiction. I limit the discussion to four novels of my choice, commonly considered

by various scholars to belong to the dystopian genre – Aldous Huxley’s *Brave New World* (1932), George Orwell’s *Nineteen Eighty-Four* (1948), Ray Bradbury’s *Fahrenheit Four Fifty-One* (1953) and Margaret Atwood’s *The Handmaid’s Tale* (1985). Though in the following discussion examples will be taken from all of these novels, most of my examples will be from *Nineteen Eighty-Four* and *The Handmaid’s Tale* as these are the novels I concentrate on in the thesis.

Erika Gottlieb has made a distinction between the dystopian societies in the first two, *Brave New World* and *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, and the last two, *Fahrenheit Four Fifty-One* and *The Handmaid’s Tale*, by pointing out that *Fahrenheit Four Fifty-One* and *The Handmaid’s Tale* are not world-wide dystopias, but focus on the USA and even though they do include characteristics of a totalitarian regime, they do not offer a similar overwhelming ideology as in *Brave New World* and *Nineteen Eighty-Four* to cover up the blunt injustice of those in power (2001: 88).

As mentioned above, Margaret Atwood herself has claimed that *The Handmaid’s Tale* is not science fiction. By this Atwood bears in mind that *The Handmaid’s Tale* does not involve extraterrestrial life (BA 2). Here it is important to clarify that the term science fiction can refer to slightly different areas of fiction. According to a commonly held view among many scholars, speculative fiction is an umbrella term, which includes such genres as science fiction, horror fiction, and fantasy (Org 2001: 6). These three subgenres are related because of the element of fantastic fiction present in all of them, which, in turn, can also include fairy tales, myths, utopias, dystopias, sagas, and other texts of a similar kind (Org 2001: 146). At the same time Org admits that a narrower approach can also be adopted where speculative fiction is first and foremost science fiction (2001: 6). So when Margaret Atwood claims that her novel is not science fiction, she is right, if for her science

fiction is a distinct part of speculative fiction. For the sake of clarity the term dystopian fiction will be used in the present thesis to refer to the genre of *The Handmaid's Tale*.

Dystopia as a literary genre is often seen as the opposite of utopia. If the way of life and social progress is idealistic and desirable in utopia, it is very pessimistic and unpleasant in dystopia (Fitzsimmons and Woods 1996: para 4). The term itself is fairly recent and was coined by Max J. Patrick in 1952 (Gottlieb 2001: 4). There is a strong connection between utopia and dystopia since dystopia is described through utopia, and their areas of interest are very similar (Dodson 1997a: 99). It is important to bear in mind that most dystopian societies have some seeds of the utopian dream in it, only the original dream has been distorted beyond recognition (Gottlieb 2001: 8). Here *The Handmaid's Tale* is an exception as the social order was forced into being because of the threats of pollution and infertility (Gottlieb 2001: 103) not because of the ultimate dream of creating a perfect society. However, connections with the world as it used to be are present to a greater or smaller extent in all of the novels mentioned above.

The aim of dystopias is to warn the readers and make them think about all the dangers in their society, because there remain clear connections with the present order. *The Handmaid's Tale* definitely works as a cautionary tale, where Atwood tries to warn the reader against “right-wing fundamentalism, rigid dogmas, and misogynous theosophies” (Malak 1987: 12) that were gaining popularity at the time she was writing the novel. Nevertheless, *The Handmaid's Tale* tends to warn the twenty-first century reader even more than the reader of the mid-1980s when the novel was first published. In comparison with the 1980s, the situation in the new millennium seems to be closer to the situation at the time shortly before the Republic of Gilead came into being. No paper money existed, the environment was heavily polluted, sterility had become a problem – these were just some of the many factors leading to the formation of the totalitarian Republic of Gilead.

The president of the United States of America was shot, the Congress was machine-gunned, the Constitution was suspended, newspapers were censored, roads were blocked, people just “disappeared” – one thing led to another and conveniently enough, Islamic fanatics were blamed for starting this chain reaction (Atwood 1996: 183). Nothing happened overnight, but everybody was too astonished or scared or just passive to resist any of it, until it was too late and there was no escape.

After living in the Republic of Gilead for a while, Offred can see from a distance the things that led to the totalitarian social order. She thinks that “[n]othing changes instantaneously” (Atwood 1996: 66) and that there were signs indicating that something was very wrong, but people lived, “as usual, by ignoring” (Atwood 1996: 66). The stories in newspapers about people dying were too melodramatic and did not belong to the dimension of the ordinary people’s lives, because the news were about men and women they did not know personally (Atwood 1996: 66).

This leads to one of the prevalent characteristics of dystopian science fiction and this is the emphasis on duality and on juxtaposition of the two time-planes – past (or present) and present (or future) (Gottlieb 2001: 15). The readers have to identify the difference between the time where the protagonist lives, which is their hypothetical future, and the readers’ time, which is that of the writing of the novel, as well as recognise that “these two time-planes are joined in a cause-effect relationship” (Gottlieb 2001: 15). Dystopian fiction always looks into the future from the point of view of writing the work, which becomes the present from the novel’s point of view, but in some novels it is the near future, so that even the protagonist can remember the world as it used to be (*The Handmaid’s Tale*) or at least some of it (*Nineteen Eighty-Four*), while in others it is a more distant future, so that mostly just rumours have remained of the old world order (*Fahrenheit Four Fifty-One*, *Brave New World*). Inevitably, when comparing things with the future, all the above novels also deal

with the past, by bringing out what used to be similar or different. In *Fahrenheit Four Fifty-One*, for example, the major opposition comes from the purpose of the fire fighters. In the past firemen put fires out instead of starting them (Bradbury 1976: 15). In addition to the circumstances that have changed, some of them have also remained the same or almost the same, reminding the characters of the novels, as well as the reader, that everything might not be lost. In *Fahrenheit Four Fifty-One* people still play cards (Bradbury 1976: 37) and make bets (Bradbury 1976: 31), they also have the same problems as in the past – the fear of losing everything, including the house and the job (Bradbury 1976: 55).

Another instance of duality, namely the dual nature of the plot is illustrated by *The Handmaid's Tale*, which is structured as a literary work within a literary work (Borges, qtd. in Aunin 2000: 9). In Atwood's novel the two layers are the tale proper and the frame provided by the two dedications, three epigraphs and the historical notes of the twenty-second-century historians. From the structural perspective, *The Handmaid's Tale* exists in two different time frames in the future. The novel is set in an imaginary Republic of Gilead in the region of the United States of America now still known as New England in the near future from the point of view of 1985 when the book was first published (Kuester 1992: 127). The outer frame into which the tale proper fits is set in the northern reaches of Canada, two hundred years away in the future, in 2195, taking the form of a conference of twenty-second-century historians discussing the totalitarian regime of the Republic of Gilead (Kuester 1992: 134). In *Nineteen Eighty-Four* there are “two books within the book” (Gottlieb 2001: 16) – Goldstein's Book, describing how the situation in the 1930s and 1940s led to the social order of Oceania in 1984, and the Dictionary of Newspeak, which tries to see into the future of Oceania in 2035 (Gottlieb 2001: 16).

In addition, the sphere of binary opposition might also cover such dualities as emotion and reason, intuition and science, kindness and cruelty, love and power, good and evil and so on (Malak 1987: 10). In *The Handmaid's Tale* duality is presented in the dual nature of the whole plot, for example, the Handmaids are allowed to walk in pairs only, there are numerous oppositions between past and present, day and night, or Canada and the United States of America.

Another common feature exemplifying both the clash between the past and present as well as the power of the word discussed below is the concept of rewriting history as a means of state propaganda, by making people believe in things that did not happen so that the social order could be legitimised. Each protagonist's search for the knowledge of history points to the fact that records of the past are "vital to the mental health of any society" (Gottlieb 2001: 12). Dictatorships cannot afford their subjects to remember the world as it used to be and to start comparing the new regime with the old one (Gottlieb 2001: 104). In *Fahrenheit Four Fifty-One* it is the history of fire fighting in America and the Bible that have been rewritten to give a sound base for the new world order (Bradbury 1976: 39, 81). The authorities also fail to catch Montag, but still make people believe that the chase was a success (Bradbury 1976: 143). In *Nineteen Eighty-Four* the whole history is constantly rewritten, people are stuck off history as if they never had existed (Orwell 2003: 157) and allies in wars are represented the same all through history, even though they constantly change (Orwell 2003: 34). It is a society where "[e]verything faded into mist. The past was erased, the erasure was forgotten, the lie became truth" (Orwell 2003: 75). In order to be able to remember, the protagonists of *Nineteen Eighty-Four* as well as of *The Handmaid's Tale* start keeping a diary, which in the future would make the past recoverable and not dependent on human memory only.

Distorting the past goes hand in hand with over-simplifying certain aspects of society. By making details and choices disappear and by abolishing words to prevent unwanted thoughts, people are made to believe that there is only one way of doing things which is also the right way. In *Fahrenheit Four Fifty-One* Beatty summarises the main ideas of the society in the following way: “If you don’t want a man unhappy politically, don’t give him two sides to a question to worry him; give him one. Better yet, give him none” (Bradbury 1976: 64). Dystopias also dramatise the eternal conflict between individual choice and social necessity as individuals resent the replacement of their freedom of choice by compulsory decisions made by the authorities (Malak 1987: 10). In *The Handmaid’s Tale* this feature is very clear as well, since all basic human rights have been taken away from the Handmaids.

Another aspect that shows the difference between the old and the new world order and supports the ultimate aim of reaching the notion of *we* is technological innovation. Technology has been improved considerably in most of the dystopian novels, the best examples being *Brave New World* where people are standardised and produced in Hatcheries (Huxley 1998:15) or *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, which has “machines that break (Smith’s lift), snoop (the Thought Police helicopter, the telescreen), oppress (the speakwrite), or torment (the ‘advanced’ instruments of torture in the Ministry of Love basements)” (Bolton 1984: 157). *The Handmaid’s Tale* is an exception, as no advanced technology has been used for brainwashing people and this follows the idea of Brians, who has claimed that technological innovation is not always needed, because just like *The Handmaid’s Tale* demonstrates, social change can also become the required source for various thought experiments (2004: para 1). Technology, however, helps the ruling elite to control the society by abolishing privacy or communication with a fellow human being. People are simultaneously encouraged to spend time with the right people and to avoid

unwanted and unmonitored communication. With the help of the walls in *Fahrenheit Four Fifty-One*, which, for instance, make people participate in plays coming on the wall-to-wall circuit (Bradbury 1976: 26), people are never alone, as all lonely activities are if not forbidden, then at least disfavoured by all means. In *Brave New World* “every one belongs to every one else” (Huxley 1998: 47) and in order to increase communication between the faithful believers and to discourage love of nature and solitude, children are trained to hate flowers (Huxley 1998: 29). There are no front porches, rocking-chairs and gardens, because these are the places for pondering about things and communicating to each other (Bradbury 1976: 66). It is believed that if people are never alone, they have no time for thinking about things the ruling class tries to make them forget.

Another significant characteristic of dystopian fiction is the prevalence of fear. What people are most afraid of is being pushed into the circle of outsiders and declared unworthy of living in the society. Atwood very masterfully renders the influence of fear on human psychology by describing the Wall, Salvagings and Particutions, while Orwell describes private and public trials, Hate Weeks and Two-Minute Hates. In addition to internal terror, external threats often loom in the background (Malak 1987: 10). The external threat lurking in the distance can be radiation, war, pollution or something completely different, its only purpose being to cause tension, inner terror and fuel constant fear of extinction, the latter helping to justify the grotesque experiments on people (Clayton 1982, qtd. in Aunin 2000: 11). In *The Handmaid's Tale* the threat is the radioactive fallout from atomic power plants after earthquakes in the San Andreas Fault area (Atwood 1996: 122) and the colonies full of toxic waste dumps and radiation spills (Atwood 1996: 260), in *Fahrenheit Four Fifty-One* the role is performed by jet planes (Bradbury 1976: 38) and in *Nineteen Eighty-Four* there is constant imaginary war either between Oceania and Eurasia or Eastasia (Orwell 2003: 180).

The prevalent feature of dystopian fiction is the play on the borderline of political satire and human tragedy (Gottlieb 2001: 13), but also on that of fantasy and reality. It could be said that dystopias desecrate reality with nightmarish visions (Borges, qtd. in Aunin 2000: 9). But on another level, it is also an opposition between the way Offred tells a story about her meeting with Nick and later admits that the described event did not happen that way at all. In case of the former, it is crucially important to ask what the force that led to the new world order was. The old worlds include the seeds of the new worlds, or as Erika Gottlieb has put it, our society has its flaws that make the new society possible (2001: 4). However, those seeds are not very noticeable in the old world order and even though they exist, they do not have a considerable impact on everyday life. Their impact is insignificant as long as there is equilibrium in a society. When that equilibrium is disturbed, things that used to be insignificant and possibly hidden start to acquire relevance. They become abnormally distorted and replace the old way of life. Thus, dystopian fiction can be seen as a kind of thought experiment, which isolates certain social, political or technological trends and exaggerates them to make clear their most negative qualities (Brians 2004: para 1). Here it becomes relevant to point out what the force that led to losing the vital equilibrium in the society was. It is important to bear in mind that the phenomena leading to the new totalitarian world order that is commonly considered to be worse than the old one do not appear out of thin air. They exist in every society, including those which consider themselves democratic, and this is exactly why dystopias become relevant. Matei Calinescu has pointed out that the *real* world is incomprehensible until we see it in the context of other possible worlds to which the *real* one actually belongs (1982: 141, qtd. in Aunin 2000: 7). According to this explanation, dystopia works as effective means of realising the *real* world around the readers and makes them think about all the possible solutions apart from the one they live in. Therefore, in imagining the horrifying future, the

world of today is already included as well and the writers condemn those aspects of past and present, which allow a future of that kind (Aunin 2000: 8).

The characteristics of the genre of dystopia become particularly important from the point of view of my interest in language. Ildney Cavalcanti argues that “language often /.../ surfaces in the literary dystopias as a key element in the construction of narrative conflict” (2000: para 60), and the prominence of language becomes apparent because of the restricted totalitarian surroundings. Language would not be such an important issue if these novels were set in other surroundings. It seems that language is the basic tool that is used in order to enforce the change desired by the people sharing the vision of the new society. It is through words and brainwashing that the new social order is introduced and advertised. It is words that make the whole society believe in the necessity of change. The change has to be rationalised and every unpopular action has to be explained. Otherwise people would refuse to put up with the change. The public has to be deceived and charmed until they are tightly caught in the net from where there is no easy escape. The change goes step by step until it reaches the point envisaged by the ruling elite.

For the purpose of brainwashing the totalitarian regimes use various slogans all people living in the society know by heart and are supposed to follow without questioning their meaning. These slogans are combined with demonstrations, rituals and ceremonies compulsory to everyone or to a certain class of people. All these factors again work for the ruling class via forcing people into frames. In *Brave New World* the motto of the World State is “Community, Identity, Stability” (Huxley 1998: 7). In *Nineteen Eighty-Four* the three famous slogans are “WAR IS PEACE”, “FREEDOM IS SLAVERY” and “IGNORANCE IS STRENGTH” (Orwell 2003: 16) and there also exists the strong belief that two plus two can equal either four or five, “depending on the Party’s latest position on the matter” (Gottlieb 2001: 34). In *The Handmaid’s Tale* the words that have become

unofficial slogans and substitutes for prayers for Offred are the word ‘faith’ (Atwood 1996: 67) and the Latin nonsense “Nolite te bastardes carborundorum” (Atwood 1996: 101). Through the latter Offred also realises that language can be used as a force of resistance as those words, left by her predecessor, suggest that defiance is possible (Hogsette 1997: 269).

As discussed above, in order to execute their power, dystopian authorities frequently restrict the use of language. Naturally this does not mean only speech, but also reading and writing (Stein 1991: 270), a policy that is clearly exemplified in *The Handmaid’s Tale* as well. In *Fahrenheit Four Fifty-One* all books are burnt by the firemen, in *Brave New World* small children are trained to hate books so that they will hate them for the rest of their lives (Huxley 1998: 29), in *The Handmaid’s Tale* the Handmaids are not even allowed to read signs on shops, let alone books, and in *Nineteen Eighty-Four* special books are created by the machines for the proles to read, whereas all literature in Oldspeak is to be destroyed and replaced by the Newspeak versions, which are “contradictory to what they used to be” (Orwell 2003: 53). However, the power of word and old books is also present in all of the four novels. In *The Handmaid’s Tale* it is the Bible and even the glossy magazines from the past (Atwood 1996: 164), in *Fahrenheit Four Fifty-One* it is the Bible and the classics scrupulously memorized by people who have formed a unique walking library scattered all over the country (Bradbury 1976: 147), in *Brave New World* it is the Bible and the works of Shakespeare and in *Nineteen Eighty-Four* it is the book by Goldstein, usually not referred to by its full title *The Theory and Practice of Oligarchical Collectivism* (Orwell 2003: 184), but just by the phrase *the book* (Orwell 2003: 13). Old books become a treasure to keep, because they depict the world as it used to be.

In the circumstances where communication is strictly monitored, the Controller in *Brave New World*, the Commander in *The Handmaid’s Tale*, the Grand Inquisitor O’Brien in

Nineteen Eighty-Four and Captain Beatty in *Fahrenheit Four Fifty-One* all have something in common – even though they belong to the elite, they have been given enough wisdom and apparent humanity as to make them seem not heartless monsters, but fellow human beings. This way the protagonists believe in the secret resistance of the person they are working for and are encouraged to make their move against the social order. As Gottlieb puts it, it is the “protagonist’s trial” (2001: 10) and it is connected with the original utopian promise of a perfect society, which has not been fulfilled, forcing the elite to find self-justification and using it as an instrument of testing the protagonist’s faithfulness (Gottlieb 2001: 10). Those feelings of mutual discontent and belonging together become very important in the communication of people of different social position, as this makes the protagonist open up and express more ideas than they had planned to the people on top. Winston believes that O’Brien is on his side as he imagines him saying “I am with you,’ /.../ ‘I know precisely what you are feeling. I know all about your contempt, your hatred, your disgust. But don’t worry, I am on your side!’” (Orwell 2003: 17). In *Fahrenheit Four Fifty-One* Montag believes that Captain Beatty tries to send him hints that he is not satisfied with the new order of things by demonstrating the knowledge of things no one is officially supposed to know, because officially these things did not happen (Bradbury 1976: 45) like firemen putting out fires in the past (Bradbury 1976: 62). The discontent with the new social order that Captain Beatty in *Fahrenheit Four Fifty-One* feels is similar to that of the Commander in *The Handmaid’s Tale*, which is also the cornerstone of the relationship between Offred and the Commander that crosses the border of an acceptable relationship in the Republic of Gilead. In Atwood’s novel the protagonist does not go through a public or secret trial (Gottlieb 2001: 10), at times it feels as if the one on trial is the Commander himself as his faith in the new social order is tested during his encounters with Offred.

In addition to turning, in their heads, one person on a high position into their ally, the protagonists also find other people among their own class who do not share the belief in the social order and who support the protagonists in their thoughts of resistance and are part of some kind of underground movement. In *Fahrenheit Four Fifty-One* these are Clarisse, Faber and the people Montag meets by the abandoned railroad tracks. In *The Handmaid's Tale* it is Ofglen and some other Handmaids who know about the Underground Femaleroad.

Last but not least, to be able to make people believe in the totalitarian order, the elite has to have a great deal of power. Dystopias deal with power, showing how it functions mercilessly to its optimal totalitarian limit, in a society where power and social hierarchy are the foundations of the order. As O'Brien puts it in *Nineteen Eighty-Four* – “[t]he object of persecution is persecution. The object of torture is torture. The object of power is power” (Orwell 2003: 263). When dealing with power, dystopias are essentially “ideological novels” revealing a definite and very strict philosophical and socio-political outlook (Malak 1987: 11) and a nightmarish vision of a barbaric state religion (Gottlieb 2001: 10). Erika Gottlieb has pointed out that “dystopian society functions as a primitive state religion that practises the ritual of human sacrifice” (2001: 10-11). Individuals have ceased to be individuals but have been turned into victims, who have no freedom to make decisions concerning their own life, which has been destroyed, making them live rather in the public than in the private sphere of the society. It is through state propaganda and advanced technologies capable of successful brainwashing that the individual's private self, family relations, sexuality, thoughts, and emotions are broken down and replaced with the collective notion of *we* (Gottlieb 2001: 11-12), which, in addition to the unifying unarguable ideology of the society, is also visible in colour-coded people who wear uniforms or at least some special mark that puts them into a certain social class just by

sight. All the people in a certain class are always called by a common name, whether it be the letters of the Greek alphabet as in *Brave New World*, proles and Outer and Inner Party members in *Nineteen Eighty-Four* or Handmaids, Marthas, Aunts and the Guardians of the Faith in *The Handmaid's Tale*. The existence of a very concrete and transparent social order makes communication between people of different classes usually quite limited, but also very significant.

This relationship of language and power will be the focus of both the theoretical and empirical chapter, with a special reference to Margaret Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale* in the light of Pierre Bourdieu's views in his work *Language and Symbolic Power*. Bourdieu's theory has been chosen for the purposes of this thesis because although he developed his theory of language and power on the basis of democratic societies, his ideas can be adapted to totalitarian societies as well. An advantage of Bourdieu's theory, that makes its application to Atwood's novel possible, is that he provides numerous examples from real social circumstances and situations in a democratic society, which in turn help to recognise and analyse totalitarian distortions of democratic rules and practices in dystopian fiction. The discussion concentrates on those aspects of Bourdieu's theory that can be used for analysing *The Handmaid's Tale*, the central one of them being the idea that power comes into the language from the social conditions and the linguistic market surrounding the speaker rather than from inside the structure of language itself. The present thesis aims to contribute to the criticism of Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale* by providing a close reading of two sets of human relationships in the novel where the distribution and exercising of power through language can be seen as their quintessence.

1 LANGUAGE AND POWER

The theoretical chapter concentrates on the issues of language and power in Pierre Bourdieu's *Language and Symbolic Power* and the issue of language in George Orwell's *Nineteen Eighty-Four* to provide a basis for an exploration of them in Margaret Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale* in the empirical part of the thesis. The first subchapter presents the main terms and ideas of Bourdieu that can be applied to an analysis of the functioning of totalitarian societies and their fictional accounts in the genre of dystopian fiction. For the purposes of the further analysis of *The Handmaid's Tale*, the examples in the discussion of Bourdieu's theory will be given mostly from Atwood's novel, even though multiple instances where Bourdieu's views would be applicable can be found in *Nineteen Eighty-Four* as well. The second subchapter concentrates on the functioning of language in *Nineteen Eighty-Four* and emphasises the connections of *Nineteen Eighty-Four* with Margaret Atwood's novel *The Handmaid's Tale*.

1.1 Language and Power in Pierre Bourdieu and the Relevant Implications for Totalitarianism

Individuals speak with different degrees of authority: it depends on the person who utters the words how much weight those words gain – not everyone can start or stop wars just by saying so or present an unbelievable innovative idea which would be taken seriously. In his *Language and Symbolic Power* the French sociologist Pierre Bourdieu has discussed the relationship between language and power and the social position of the speakers. Bourdieu emphasises that in human communication what matters most is the relatively autonomous social space, also called a field or market, with its definite rules which dictate the behaviour of the people communicating in that field. The viewpoints and behaviour of a person are shaped in the course of interaction between the social structures

of the field and the mental structures of the person. In his theory Bourdieu has found a way how to integrate linguistics with other factors operating in society and even though he has developed his theory on the basis of capitalist democratic societies and adapted terminology from economics, his ideas are also applicable to a totalitarian society, which, as in the case of *The Handmaid's Tale* is actually a gradual, almost logical, though distorted development of a democracy.

Bourdieu has formulated what is essentially the main idea behind *Nineteen Eighty-Four* as follows: “[l]anguage /.../ is no doubt the principal support of the dream of absolute power” (1997: 42). He does not take language to be an object of contemplation, as it is often seen in linguistics, but as an instrument of action and power (Bourdieu 1997: 37) by stating that “it is rare in everyday life for language to function as a pure instrument of communication” (Bourdieu 1997: 66). This idea supports the position of language in the totalitarian Republic of Gilead, where language is clearly more than just the means for expressing one’s thoughts. The state is responsible for generating and controlling the social uses of the official language in a particular society (Bourdieu 1997: 45). The state also creates the unified linguistic market, where only the official language is accepted (Bourdieu 1997: 45), and it does so through the education system, which plays a decisive role in “the construction, legitimation and imposition of an official language” (Bourdieu 1997: 48). To assume power through using language, one has to regulate the correct written language by giving the force of law to it (Bourdieu 1997: 49). In the process, language acquires the power of the suggestion as well, which does not tell a person what he or she must do but rather determines what he or she is and consequently what he or she has to become (Bourdieu 1997: 52). In the totalitarian society of Gilead the use of language has been restricted in accordance with the social classes. The Handmaids, for instance, are not allowed to express their thoughts through elaborate language and in some situations

they are permitted to use only certain accepted phrases that are crammed into their heads in the Red Centers, which are the special education institutions for the Handmaids.

Though at first language in Gilead does not seem to assume a position as significant as that in Oceania, it becomes more significant in the course of the novel. Or, to be more exact, what becomes more significant is not the language itself but the lack of language. The language of Gilead is by no means as radically different from the old language as Newspeak is different from Oldspeak in Orwell's Oceania, but there do exist certain phrases coined by the authorities that correspond to the ideas of Newspeak – the phrases are short and they work for the main ideology. For instance, the official phrases refer to the Bible probably for the purposes of emphasising the Biblical background of the society and for reminding the Handmaids that they should not risk crossing the lines. If according to the official policies of Oceania, one can control thoughts through language and make some ideas impossible when there are no words to express those thoughts, then, according to a similar pattern, the aim of the authorities in Gilead seems to force the Handmaids into a state where they speak as little as possible and do not think at all. This is why Offred feels as if she were “using a language [she]’d once known but had nearly forgotten” (Atwood 1996: 164) when she is spelling out words while playing Scrabble with the Commander.

Before one can go on to discuss other aspects of Bourdieu's theory in *Language and Symbolic Power*, some relevant concepts, which can be also adapted to totalitarian societies and an analysis of dystopian fiction, should be introduced. The key concepts Bourdieu speaks about are symbolic power, linguistic habitus, symbolic domination, symbolic capital, legitimate competence, legitimate language, linguistic market, and profit of distinction. The crucial concept behind explaining why people in the totalitarian society accept their position is symbolic power. Symbolic power is power which presupposes that it is recognised as such and that at the same time those who acknowledge it cannot

recognise the violence that is exercised through that power (Bourdieu 1997: 209). This means, in particular, that those who do not possess the competence to perform according to the rules of the official language still acknowledge that the language they cannot speak is the legitimate one and through this acknowledgement support the symbolic violence, which is thus actually gentle, because it is accepted as exercised by the authorities. In other words, the dominated themselves also collaborate with the authorities by trying to evaluate their own and the others' linguistic productions by the yardstick of the official standards. Linguistic habitus, which has been constructed by society, includes in itself the natural tendency to express oneself through speech and a certain competence to generate an endless number of grammatically correct sentences (Bourdieu 1997: 37), yet it is also the social capacity to use this competence sufficiently and in an appropriate way in different kinds of strictly controlled social situations (Bourdieu 1997: 37). So in the light of the linguistic habitus, language refers to certain ways of speech, which mark a person as a member of a certain social group. Symbolic domination assumes that those who obey are neither passively submitted nor have consciously and voluntarily accepted the values of the society (Bourdieu 1997: 51). Its distinctiveness lies in the fact that it is presupposed that those who submit to it have "an attitude which challenges the usual dichotomy of freedom and constraint" (Bourdieu 1997: 51). Another key concept, symbolic capital stands for prestige, honour and the right to be listened to, which has been accumulated through one's linguistic practices (Bourdieu 1997: 72). Speakers possess power in proportion to their symbolic capital, or in other words, in proportion to the extent they receive recognition from a group (Bourdieu 1997: 106). Legitimate competence is a capacity fixed by law which allows an authorized person to use the formal, i.e. legitimate language on formal occasions (Bourdieu 1997: 69), whereas legitimate language is the authoritative language that has to be heard, believed and obeyed and which claims to be effective (Bourdieu 1997:

69-70). Legitimate practices are the practices of the dominant (Bourdieu 1997: 53). What is more, all linguistic practices are measured against those legitimate practices in order to put them in context (Bourdieu 1997: 53). Profit of distinction is produced by linguistic capital and is the act of using certain language in a certain linguistic field so that it creates the greatest advantage for the speaker in comparison with the linguistic capital of the other speakers (Bourdieu 1997: 55). Last but not least, there is the concept of a linguistic market, which is a system of specific sanctions and censorships in a society. The structure of the linguistic market or field is “a system of specifically linguistic relations of power based on the unequal distribution of linguistic capital” (Bourdieu 1997: 57). What is more, individuals tend to adjust through habitus to the social space, i.e. the linguistic market or field, they inhabit. Since linguistic markets set a certain value to linguistic expressions, the speaker has to be aware of when and how to produce utterances that are highly valued in particular social contexts, i.e. the markets. Bourdieu emphasises the idea that people of different status are allowed to say different things in the same circumstances, which set certain restrictions, as the speaker has to be correct politically as well as grammatically (Bourdieu 1997: 37). In Bourdieu’s view:

[t]he objective meaning engendered in linguistic circulation is based, first of all, on the distinctive value which results from the relationship that the speakers establish, consciously or unconsciously, between the linguistic product offered by a socially characterized speaker, and the other products offered simultaneously in a determinate social space. It is also based on the fact that the linguistic product is only completely realized as a message if it is treated as such, that is to say, if it is decoded, and the associated fact that the schemes of interpretation used by those receiving the message in their creative appropriation of the product offered may diverge, to a greater or lesser extent, from those which guided its production. Through these unavoidable effects, the market plays a part in shaping not only the symbolic value but also the meaning of discourse. (1997: 38)

The more formal the market the more it is dominated by the dominant, by those who have been given the power to speak with authority (Bourdieu 1997: 69). Since the aim of totalitarianism is to decrease dissidence and acquire absolute power, the purpose of a totalitarian social order is to make society as formal as possible in order to give more

power to those who occupy top positions in the society and take power away from everyone else. In *The Handmaid's Tale* there is no question about who officially has the most power, or as Offred puts it, “[t]here’s no doubt about who holds the real power” (Atwood 1996: 146).

The speakers have to know whether they are entitled to speak in particular circumstances and the listeners have to accept the speakers and their right to speak. Bourdieu claims that linguistic exchanges are “relations of symbolic power in which the power relations between speakers /.../ are actualised” (1997: 37). The linguistic market as a whole can be manipulated within certain limits, for instance, one can use certain expressions to introduce speech which is too free or shocking or explicitly say something which supports the sincere truthfulness of a particular market (Bourdieu 1997: 71). The capacity to manipulate with the market is greater when the manipulator possesses more capital (Bourdieu 1997: 71). In more recent terms it is the manipulator who possesses power over discourse (e.g. Maryns and Blommaert 2002) and is also able to change the rules of the discourse. When Offred enters the Commander’s office for the first time, the Commander in essence manipulates with the market by greeting her with the word ‘hello’, which is quite unexpected as it is out of the context in Gilead. Since the Commander belongs to the authorities and this is his room, he has all the power necessary for breaking the rules and producing utterances inappropriate for the particular situation from the official as well as from Offred’s point of view. From the point of view of the Commander, however, the old way of greeting actually suits the circumstances perfectly since his study is full of things from the past and in this study life resembles the life as it used to be or at least comes as close to it as possible. The Commander takes Offred back to the old world and so the market where their interaction takes place changes for Offred as well. As a result the greeting ‘hello’ does not seem strange for her ears in the future, because it is not

the violation of the rules of the market any more. When Bourdieu speaks about the appropriateness of certain utterances in certain social conditions he does not explicitly discuss the fact that the market is in constant change and what seemed inappropriate at one time in one market between two speakers of different power positions might become appropriate in the same market between the same speakers of the same power positions just because one of the speakers changes the attitude towards the market and takes over the way how one of speakers perceives the market. However, he does allow for the possibility when discussing ways used by dominant speakers to protect their profit of distinction via changing the rules of legitimate language and behaviour as upwardly mobile persons strive to acquire them. The self-protection is accomplished through what others have termed power over discourse (see above) which implies the power to alter or even reverse the rules at any moment, thus making it at least difficult – though, as Bourdieu’s own life story demonstrates, not altogether impossible to catch up.

Bourdieu has extensively explored the question of how meaning is created in communication. He holds the view that the word itself has no meaning on its own as dictionaries would have us believe, but it acquires meaning only when it is used in a social situation (Bourdieu 1997: 39). In other words – language and social context are inseparable and in addition to shaping the symbolic value of the discourse, the market and the social structure play a part in shaping the meaning of the discourse (Bourdieu 1997: 38) so that discourses “derive their efficacy from the hidden correspondence between the structure of the social place within which they are produced /.../ and the structure of the field of social classes within which the recipients are situated and in relation to which they interpret the message” (Bourdieu 1997: 41). So the social position of the speaker presupposes how language is used, which language is used and what is said with that particular language (Bourdieu 1997: 109). Thus in order to understand the intended meaning of an utterance

one also has to be familiar with the social context and be able to interpret the utterance accordingly. It is important to realise that one does not only have to understand and decipher the utterances, but also take them to be *signs of wealth*, which should be evaluated and appreciated, and *signs of authority*, which should be believed and obeyed (Bourdieu 1997: 66, italics original). In other words, the receiver has to recognise a given communication as having the authority (Bourdieu 1997: 111-113) as well as a given speaker as being authorised to speak up (Bourdieu 1997: 116). For instance, Offred has trouble interpreting what the Commander's Wife is hinting at, because she is not sure whether Serena Joy is exercising her power and violating the market rules or not.

Bourdieu claims that “[t]he different meanings of a word are defined in the relation between the invariant core and the specific logic of the different markets, themselves objectively situated with respect to the market in which the most common meaning is defined” (Bourdieu 1997: 39). So each word is measured against its most common meaning and then the specific meaning of a particular social context is decided upon from the information gained from the comparison. The more control there is in the system, the more the conversation is dependent on the situation and the more knowledge it requires from the listener to understand the true meaning. In totalitarian societies where certain things cannot be said out loud, a lot can be read from between the lines if one knows how to find information there. It might be easier to hide the meaning in the case of written texts, as people have more time to find and decipher the possible other meanings there, but in the Republic of Gilead the Handmaids do not have access to written texts and so the secret signal of the underground movement ‘May Day’ has to be spread cautiously hidden among words spoken just once. Offred tries to test the new Ofglen by saying: “‘I’ve only known her since May,’ /.../ I can feel my skin growing hot, my heart speeding up. This is tricky. For one thing, it’s a lie. And how do I get from there to the next vital word? ‘Around the

first of May I think it was. What they used to call May Day” (Atwood 1996: 296). In Gilead words are scarce and therefore they also get more weight than they normally would.

In addition to having a great deal of weight and multiple (hidden) meanings, it is also possible for statements to be “*formally* impeccable but semantically empty” (Bourdieu 1997: 41, italics original). In the Republic of Gilead the question of having a meaning is closely connected with the question of having a meaning for whom. Though the official greetings and ready-made questions and answers the Handmaids are allowed to say to each other refer to the world around them, like “[w]e’ve been sent good weather” (Atwood 1996: 29), or to their feelings “[w]hich I receive with joy” (Atwood 1996: 29), or are meant to be related to the Bible, like “[b]lessed be the fruit” (Atwood 1996: 29), “[m]ay the Lord open” (Atwood 1996: 29), and “[p]raise be” (Atwood 1996: 29), they are completely meaningless for the Handmaids themselves. This is not the communication they would wish to have and they are using those phrases just to be correct formally, the latter referring to being correct in form, as well as to being in accordance with the official policy. Though the same can be said about a great number of ready-made phrases people use in their everyday life, the phrases – and their emptiness – become more pronounced in the Republic of Gilead because of the lack of opportunities to speak and express oneself. In Gilead the format is abnormally distorted to play a more significant role in a society where every utterance is counted and under constant surveillance.

However, certain words themselves can have more power and certain less power and, in certain circumstances, some words can even lose power and become to be perceived as “intrinsicly banal, common, *facile* – or /.../ as *worn out*” (Bourdieu 1997: 64, italics original). This is the case with the word ‘faith’ in *The Handmaid’s Tale*, which is a significant word for Offred because of its meaning and because, written on a cushion, it has been overlooked by the system, but it has also begun to fade out – “FAITH is a faded

blue” (Atwood 1996: 67) and lose its significance – “[f]aith is only a word, embroidered” (Atwood 1996: 304).

In addition to the direct social environment, power also comes into the conversation via an institution. The latter does not have to be a formal one, but can be comprised of just some social relations, which support the speaker’s ideas and give the speaker the linguistic power necessary for expressing certain thoughts and carrying out certain ideas (Thompson 1997: 8). According to Bourdieu, the success of the acts of institution cannot be separated from the institution defining the specific conditions behind those acts (1997: 73) and the extent to which the speaker can have access to the “language of the institution” is also dependent on the social position of the speaker (Bourdieu 1997: 109). However, while Bourdieu predominantly describes the use of language in institutionalised situations, the situations in *The Handmaid’s Tale* take on a less formal nature and show how the power of speech is exercised or fails to be exercised, in fact, is negotiated, in everyday situations in a totalitarian society. It is also the institution which gives the speaker authority to carry out the act which the utterance pretends to perform. In the Republic of Gilead this institution is the state and the social relations created and sustained by the state. Since the Commander is at the very top of the social hierarchy, he is also the one who has the power to command and forbid. He is the one who has also been given the right to read the Bible which is otherwise kept locked up (Atwood 1996: 98) and the one who can make Offred come into his room without asking Offred whether she would like to come or not. At the same time, when the umbrella of the institution is symbolically removed and the power of his uniform is gone, “he looks smaller, older, like something being dried” (Atwood 1996: 267). This transformation demonstrates how symbolic power is almost never unequivocally determined but is made up and fostered by a variety of factors, appearance among them (cf Bourdieu’s emphasis on *hexis*, the posture of the body in a broad sense).

Bourdieu has stated that “[t]here is a whole dimension of authorised language, its rhetoric, syntax, vocabulary and even pronunciation, which exists purely to underline the authority of its author and the trust he demands” (Bourdieu 1997: 76). According to Bourdieu the more linguistic competence (examples of linguistic competence being the Latin once spoken by doctors or the influential way of speaking of spokespersons) the speakers have, the more successful they are in making their language more powerful (Bourdieu 1997: 76) as “the laws of the market are more favourable to the products offered by the holders of the greatest linguistic competence – when /.../ the situation is more formal /.../, and when consumers grant more complete recognition to the legitimate language and legitimate competence” (Bourdieu 1997: 69). Offred has learned the new rhetoric of the Republic of Gilead, but since it is so limited, it does not make her more competent linguistically, but limits her instead. “Offred survives though language” (Bergmann 1989: 848), but it is the language of the old kind, not the amputated speech of the new social order.

Bourdieu states that “[t]he power of words is nothing other than the *delegated power* of the spokesperson” (1997: 107, italics original), meaning once again that authority comes to language from outside (Bourdieu 1997: 109) through the institution and the social relations. The idea of the power of the words being only the delegated power of the spokesperson is supported by the idea that there are utterances the function of which is not only to “‘describe a state of affairs or state some fact’, but also to ‘execute an action’” (Bourdieu 1997: 109). The success of this kind of utterance depends largely on the appropriateness of the speaker and on the social function of the speaker and “a performative utterance is destined to fail each time that it is not pronounced by a person who has the ‘power’ to pronounce it” (Bourdieu 1997: 111). Though the Wife clearly has

power to tell Offred what to do, Offred is doubtful at first whether Serena Joy has enough power outside her domestic circle to arrange the Handmaid's meetings with Nick.

Bourdieu states that “the language of authority never governs without the collaboration of those it governs” (1997: 113). Authorities can never subordinate people when people do not want to become subordinated and take active steps against it. This is where the authorities have to manipulate people into believing that the changes are for their own good. As a result the person instituted should feel obliged to comply with their position (Bourdieu 1997: 121). In Gilead rebellions and any acts of disobedience are explicitly showed to be doomed to failure to make people see what happens to those who do not follow the rules. In the case of Offred collaboration takes the form of silent survival, as she refuses the cease to believe in the better future. At the same time she takes advantage of every peephole there is to make her life more bearable under the reduced circumstances and therefore not only complies with the rules but also breaks them. When there are just two options – to be sent to the colonies to clear up toxic waste, which would mean an untimely death, or to be alive as a Handmaid, Offred chooses the latter not because she wants a life of that kind and not because she believes in the ideology of Gilead, but because of her own personal survival.

Since totalitarian societies pay great attention to ritualised public gatherings, which are compulsory to all or some inhabitants, they also have to make sure that the social relations are firm and unwavering as, according to Bourdieu, the precondition of ritual exchanges is that “all the social conditions are in place to ensure the production of appropriate senders and receivers” (1997: 72-73). In Gilead the public mass rituals, like the Salvagings or the Particutions, play a central role in the society both in brainwashing people into believing the ideology of the authorities and also in intimidating people into obedience. The

authorities also take care that the Handmaids attend the right public rituals by forbidding them to go anywhere on their own.

Bourdieu believes that “[t]he social uses of language owe their specifically social value to the fact that they tend to be organized in systems of differences /.../ which reproduce, in the symbolic order of differential deviations, the system of social differences” (54). When one speaks, their speech shows which social class they belong to and, furthermore, by being considered to belong to a certain social class they are expected to use the language marked by “their position in a hierarchy of styles which express the hierarchy of corresponding social groups” (Bourdieu 1997: 54). In the Republic of Gilead the hierarchy of social classes is more or less described by speech or no speech. Those speakers who lack the capacity to use the formal language on the formal occasions are not considered part of those “social domains in which this competence is required, or are condemned to silence” (Bourdieu 1997: 55). In Gilead the Handmaids or even the Wives were not originally lacking the competence, but with the enforcement of the new social order their new position forbids them to communicate or use certain words in certain circumstances, with the result being the same – silence. It is not a complete silence though, the Handmaids are allowed to speak when they are talked to and the Wives can talk to everyone in their household and have meetings with the other Wives of the Commanders once in a while. However, in comparison with the old world order, for those women, these limitations equal silence.

In addition to the meaning of the words and the external effects of the linguistic market one also has to bear in mind that the speaker is concerned with speaking ‘well’ and in conformity with the laws of the market, which turns discourses into “*compromise formations* resulting from a transaction between the expressive interest (what is to be said) and the censorship inherent in particular relations of linguistic production” (Bourdieu

1997: 78-79). Offred cannot say everything she would like to say in the Commander's study: she feels she has no right to say certain things under the specific circumstances in the specific surroundings. However, she does forget herself from time to time and tells the Commander what he should not do during the Ceremony (Atwood 1996: 171).

Bourdieu has also discussed the power of naming. The act of giving another person a name shows the power of the person giving the name and thereby helps to establish the structure of the world, and "does so all the more significantly the more widely it is recognized, i.e. authorized" (Bourdieu 1997: 105). In *The Handmaid's Tale* the power of naming has been used to the full and is highly authorised as the names have been taken away from the Handmaids and replaced by the names of belonging to authoritative figures. In addition to her real name, her patronymic name Offred, which denotes her belonging to a Commander named Fred (*of* plus *Fred*), or which can also be read as *offered* (Rubenstein 2001: 13), referring to her sexuality and lack of choice, can also be dismembered into another preposition and adjective, namely *off* and *red* (Givner 1992: 59), meaning either Offred's innermost desire to escape the prison of Gilead or that she really got out of her red robes as a Handmaid and out of Gilead as well. Another act of naming in Gilead concerns the babies the Handmaids give birth to. Even though the Handmaids are allowed to nurse the baby (Atwood 1996: 137), for the Wives are not able to do that, the Wives are still the ones who have the right to name the baby (Atwood 1996: 137). In the Republic of Gilead, to an even greater extent than in the old world order, giving and taking away names is an act of exercising power.

Even though the authorities can rename the Handmaids, the Handmaids remember their old names as keepsakes of the better times. The chapter in which Ofglen tries Offred's knowledge about the resistance movement by the special signal May Day begins with the statement that the weather is so good that "it's almost like June" (Atwood 1996: 53). June

might be the real name of the protagonist as Constance Rooke has suggested (qtd. in Howells 1998: 14), because the first chapter of *The Handmaid's Tale* ends with the names *Alma. Janine. Dolores. Moira. June* (Atwood 1996: 14). Since Alma, Janine, Dolores and Moira are all mentioned as characters in the novel, it might suggest that the protagonist was called June, because this is the only name not applied to any other character. When Ofglen is saying that “[i]t’s a beautiful May day” (Atwood 1996: 53) almost like in June, there is a strong connection between May and June, because Offred’s significant real name June can be associated with the call for help – Mayday. However, after comparing different drafts of *The Handmaid's Tale*, it came out that in an earlier draft the names had been Alma, Dolores, Moira, Constance, and May, and even before that Alma, Dolores, Jane, Constance, and May (Atwood *HT*). So Offred’s supposed real name might have been May instead, had not Atwood changed it in her later draft.

In addition to the actual process of naming people, “[t]here is no social agent who does not aspire /.../ to create the world through naming: gossip, slander, lies, insults, commendations, criticisms, arguments and praises” (Bourdieu 1997: 105). While giving names to the Handmaids is an official privilege of the authorities of Gilead, secret naming of authorities and gossiping about them are things the Handmaids use to make their own life a little less monotonous and almost endurable:

There is something powerful in the whispering of obscenities, about those in power. There’s something delightful about it, something naughty, secretive, forbidden, thrilling. It’s like a spell, of sorts. It deflates them, reduces them to the common denominator where they can be dealt with. In the paint of the washroom cubicle someone unknown had scratched: *Aunt Lydia sucks*. It was like a flag waved from a hilltop in rebellion. The mere idea of Aunt Lydia doing such a thing was in itself heartening. (Atwood 1996: 234)

The above discussion has shown that Bourdieu’s main thesis, according to which language is not just a means of communication, but that of having and exercising power, can be successfully applied to an analysis of a totalitarian society in Atwood’s dystopian fiction *The Handmaid's Tale*. To further theorise the functioning of language and its

relation to power in a totalitarian society, the second subchapter focuses on the issues of language in the influential source text of Atwood's novel, Orwell's *Nineteen Eighty-Four* and draws some comparisons between Orwell's and Atwood's dystopias to specify the ways in which language functions in the latter.

1.2 Language in George Orwell's *Nineteen Eighty-Four*

George Orwell's dystopian novel *Nineteen Eighty-Four* illustrates Pierre Bourdieu's idea that "[l]anguage /.../ is no doubt the principal support of the dream of absolute power (1997: 42): when one controls language, one also controls the people who use that language.

The influence of Orwell's novel and the prominence of language in it can be seen outside the world of Orwell, inside the English language itself. Some words associated with Orwell and his *Nineteen Eighty-Four* have come to be used in everyday speech, but very often they do not refer to him and his work, but rather to ideas that people have come to regard as 'Orwellian' (Bailey 1987: 23). The term refers to the deliberate manipulation of language in order to control and manipulate people (Bailey 1987: 30) and can be considered to be shorthand for ruthless oppression (Bolton 1984: 15). Whitney F. Bolton has said that Orwell's opinions on language were influential because his expressions were broad generalizations and even exaggerations (1984: 17) and therefore easily transferable to real life easily. Big Brother is not just a character in the novel (Bailey 1987: 23) but, as the New Oxford Dictionary of English (hereafter referred to as OED) explains, "a person or organization exercising total control over people's lives" (1999: 171). Doublethink as "the acceptance of or mental capacity to accept contrary opinions or beliefs at the same time, especially as a result of political indoctrination" (OED 1999: 553) is now in the language on its own (Bailey 1987: 23), whereas Newspeak denotes not only the language

Orwell invented in his novel but also virtually any “ambiguous, euphemistic language used chiefly in political propaganda” (OED 1999: 1249).

In addition to the words originating from Orwell’s novel, some principles underlying Newspeak have been present in the English language – as well as many other languages – for a long time already. Just like Newspeak, which tries to cut words short or delete them, the English language is as clipped in certain circumstances. For instance, the popular press uses headlines as cryptic as anything in *Nineteen Eighty-Four*. However, when Newspeak is aimed at simple unambiguous meaning and at losing all abstraction, the newspaper headings of today rather make the meaning vaguer. Other clipped words used for the purposes of shortness are acronyms. Acronyms, like NATO, CIA or KGB, are almost like a separate language, as they can lose their original meaning quite easily. The loss of meaning is significant because “[o]bscurity helps those operating the system, and confuses those against whom it is being operated” (Winnifrith and Whitehead 1984: 13). In *Nineteen Eighty-Four* the loss of meaning does not come from making words shorter but rather from deleting certain words altogether and assigning just one meaning to one word (as much as this is at all possible given the nature of language), but the ultimate aim is the same – to help those who operate the system deceive and manipulate the rest of the population.

Orwell was concerned about the degeneration of language, the use of meaningless words, and the use of words in “a consciously dishonest way” even before writing *Nineteen Eighty-Four* (Orwell 1946: para 8), which is meant to deceive the public. His ideas on language, especially his concerns about “the lack of precision” (Orwell 1946: para 4) in a language and the euphemistic devices designed to make horrific events palatable via obfuscation can all be seen in Newspeak. In Orwell’s view language and thoughts influence and amplify each other and to escape from this degeneration, language has to be systematically purified (Orwell 1946: para 2). What is more, the degeneration of language

also works as an instance of forewarning, demonstrating yet another dystopian element present in democratic societies.

Language plays an important role in totalitarian Oceania and this becomes clear not only from the existence of a separate appendix for clarifying the principles of Newspeak, but also from the novel proper. Even though Newspeak seems to be used quite sparingly in the novel at first glance, as there are no extended examples of the new language, it does not mean that it is not playing an important role in the depicted society as a whole. The most visible usages of Newspeak in the novel might be the following: firstly, there is the separate unintegrated appendix on Newspeak called *The Principles of Newspeak* (Orwell 2003: 298-312), secondly, Winston Smith receives messages in Newspeak in his work for the Ministry of Truth, for example, “times 17.3.84 bb speech malreported africa rectify” (Orwell 2003: 38), thirdly, O’Brien uses Newspeak as a pretext for getting in touch with Winston and Julia (Orwell 2003: 157-158), fourthly, the poet Ampleforth is arrested for failing to find a substitute for the word God in an edition of the works of Kipling (Orwell 2003: 231), fifthly, there exists the Eleventh Edition of the Newspeak Dictionary (Orwell 2003: 48), and lastly, Winston’s friend Syme, who is an enthusiastic philologist specialising in Newspeak, speaks about Newspeak in the following way: “[y]ou 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. We’re cutting the language down to the bone” (Orwell 2003: 51). Oldspeak would be stripped of “its vagueness and its useless shades of meaning” (Orwell 2003: 52), as Newspeak is designed “not to extend but to *diminish* the range of thought, and this purpose was indirectly assisted by cutting the choice of words down to a minimum” (Orwell 2003: 299). When Bourdieu speaks about defining the meaning of a word through the market where the most common meaning is defined (Bourdieu 1997: 39), then in Orwell the defining of the meaning becomes

unnecessary since every word would, at least ideally, lose all its shades of meaning and refer to only a single object or notion, which is already known and does not have to be defined. In Bourdieuan terms what is happening in Oceania is an attempt to bridle and monopolise the linguistic market.

In addition to the appendix, Syme also shortly explains the principles of Newspeak in the novel proper in the following way:

“It’s a beautiful thing, the destruction of words. Of course the great wastage is in the verbs and adjectives, but there are hundreds of nouns that can be got rid of as well. It isn’t only the synonyms; there are also the antonyms. After all, what justification is there for a word which is simply the opposite of some other word? A word contains its opposite in itself. Take ‘good’, for instance. If you have a word like ‘good’, what need is there for a word like ‘bad’? ‘Ungood’ will do just as well – better, because it’s an exact opposite, which the other is not. Or again, if you want a stronger version of ‘good’, what sense is there in having a whole string of vague useless words like ‘excellent’ and ‘splendid’ and all the rest of them? ‘Plusgood’ covers the meaning, or ‘doubleplusgood’ if you want something stronger still. Of course we use those forms already, but in the final version of Newspeak there’ll be nothing else. In the end the whole notion of goodness and badness will be covered by only six words – in reality, only one word.” (Orwell 2003: 51)

This is an example of a person’s complete belief in the system, which makes them follow the rules of the authorities blindly and wholeheartedly, not thinking about what destroying the language as a means of expressing oneself would actually entail. Elizabeth Closs Traugott, who opens her essay with Syme’s belief that “[i]t’s a beautiful thing, the destruction of words,” claims that the “survival of humanity” depends on the “responsible use of language” (1983: 102), emphasising that taking language to the extreme starts affecting the humanity of the speakers. However, in the totalitarian society, the preserving of humanity is far from being the priority of the authorities. The government of Oceania is executing its power fully by forcing people into adapting a completely different language new to all speakers alike. Newspeak is not the evolutionary outcome of English spoken in Oceania, but rather an artificial government creation (Bolton 1984: 151) and this makes the dream of ultimate power even more pronounced as the authorities are purposefully working towards controlling people through language.

Far more important than the exact principles of Newspeak provided in the appendix of *Nineteen Eighty-Four* is the idea that people's minds can be controlled through reducing language to the extent that people would not have words for expressing certain thoughts and feelings and ultimately those thoughts and feelings would not exist either. Through this process all the other modes of thought besides the official media of expression for the believers in Ingsoc would become impossible (Orwell 2003: 299), since "each word would have only one meaning, and that meaning would be compatible with the party line" (Bolton 1984: 35). "Orwell's solution was 'to invent new words as deliberately as we would invent new parts for a motor-car engine', so that 'expressing one's meaning' would be simply 'a matter of taking the right words and putting them in place, like working out an equation in algebra'" (Bolton 1984: 27). The most significant part of Newspeak in the novel serves political purposes and therefore belongs to the B vocabulary, as there the language, either old or new, "is used to cause a mass psychosis", for example, at the Two Minute Hate or during the Hate Week, where listeners lose all sense of individual response (Bailey 1987: 33). As Bailey puts it, "[w]ith the eventual implementation of Newspeak, the need for such oratory would not be needed any more, as there would be no sense of creating any kind of hysteria, because the language itself through its monotony would guarantee orthodoxy and subservience" (1987: 33):

"The proles are not human beings," he said carelessly. "By 2050 – earlier, probably – all real knowledge of Oldspeak will have disappeared. The whole literature of the past will have been destroyed. Chaucer, Shakespeare, Milton, Byron – they'll exist only in Newspeak versions, not merely changed into something different, but actually changed into something contradictory of what they used to be. Even the literature of the Party will change. Even the slogans will change. How could you have a slogan like "freedom is slavery" when the concept of freedom has been abolished? The whole climate of thought will be different. In fact there will *be* no thought, as we understand it now. Orthodoxy means not thinking – not needing to think. Orthodoxy is unconsciousness." (Orwell 2003: 53)

By abolishing vagueness and multiple meanings, creative thinking and the existence of choice is also abolished. What is more, this kind of deletion favours concrete thinking over abstract as many of the unwanted thoughts are abstract ideas.

In addition to controlling the thoughts at the present moment, the authorities of Oceania also have to control the past, which is achieved through changing everything in the written records with the ultimate aim being “a state in which people can rely on the constructs of their own minds” (Bailey 1987: 40). Providing written documentation for the past is a value we share with the society of Oceania. The acts of reading and writing provide a source of knowledge and values, but in Oceania they carry even a kind of magic (Bailey 1987: 39). This is the magic the authorities want to destroy, as according to their vision nothing external to the mind will be needed as a source of validation and truth in Oceania in the future (Bailey 1987: 40).

In his *Language and Symbolic Power* Bourdieu refers to Mikhail Bakhtin, who has stated that in revolutionary circumstances words can take on opposite meanings for people living in different social conditions (Bourdieu 1997: 40). In *Nineteen Eighty-Four* words take on opposite meanings for everyone living in Oceania, since even the names of the four ministries are opposites of what they used to mean in the previous world order. The Ministry of Truth concerns itself with news, entertainment, education, and the fine arts, the Ministry of Peace with war, the Ministry of Love maintains law and order and the Ministry of Plenty is responsible for economic affairs in a society where the economy is far from plentiful (Orwell 2003: 4). In addition to the names of the ministries, the official slogans of Oceania, “WAR IS PEACE”, “FREEDOM IS SLAVERY” and “IGNORANCE IS STRENGTH” (Orwell 2003: 16) also use oppositions and are the ultimate examples of Doublethink.

In a totalitarian society such as Oceania language, on the one hand, unites people, on the other, separates them from the outer world or creates deep cleavages within their own. The people of Oceania are forbidden to learn foreign languages (Orwell 2003: 196), as an inability to understand foreigners maintains the belief that the enemy is fundamentally

different and prevents people from forming private alliances with the two other superpowers (Bailey 1987: 29). People have to believe that the country they live in is the best one in the world even when they live in poverty. Brainwashing has to be so complete that people would not know that there are other social orders that are different or even better than their own.

Meanwhile, speech creates a divide within Oceania itself as the speech of different social classes separates them from each other. Ingsoc has a three-layer system, which consists of the Inner Party where Newspeak is ascendant, the Outer Party where Newspeak is spreading, and a proletarian class where it is unknown and cockney remains the spoken norm (Bolton 1984: 143). For Orwell, linguistics was a hobby and in addition to being interested in words borrowed from foreign languages, their pronunciation in English, and the creation of new words in English (Bolton 1984: 22), he also kept an eye on class varieties, and features that cut across regional varieties (Bolton 1984: 91). He was more interested in the speech of different social classes than in regional varieties themselves (Bolton 1984: 91). For him the absence or presence of the initial *h* in words like *all* and *hall* or *arm* and *harm* was symbolic of the linguistic line separating the social classes in Britain (Bailey 1987: 25). The same happens in *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, as the same linguistic features separate members of the Party from the proles (Bailey 1987: 24-25). Winston and Julia consider vanishing among the proles by learning “to speak with proletarian accents” (Orwell 2003: 152), but realise that “attempting such a disguise would be ‘nonsense’; their speech /.../ would immediately expose them and their class origins” (Orwell 2003: 152).

Despite the differences, language is at the same time also the only means that holds that society together, as “Oceania has no capital, and its titular head is a person whose whereabouts nobody knows. Except that English is its chief lingua franca and Newspeak

its official language, it is not centralized in any way” (Orwell 2003: 208-209). There is no government, there’s only the Party, there is no system of laws, there is only fear and there are no human relations with family and friends, there is only mass hysteria that can turn a crowd into a mob. Theo D’haen has said that if “Newspeak is Ingsoc and Ingsoc is Newspeak” (Orwell 2003: 52), then “English is Colonialism and Colonialism is English” (1984: 45). After all, Syme in *Nineteen Eighty-Four* clearly states that “[t]he Revolution will be complete when the language is perfect” (Orwell 2003: 52), or in other words, the success of politics is dependent on language and its use according to the standards set by the authorities.

In Margaret Atwood’s *The Handmaid’s Tale* there does not exist a completely new language, but just certain ready-made phrases the Handmaids are forced to use. As mentioned above, Atwood saw Orwell’s language to be one of the most important factors of his fiction and since she herself has also been very conscious about language throughout her works, she has made the issue of language quite prominent in *The Handmaid’s Tale* as well. At first glance, language seems not to play such an important role in the totalitarian Republic of Gilead as it does in totalitarian Oceania, but after having a closer look it becomes evident that this is not the case. Namely, English is still spoken in Gilead, but not everyone is free to speak it as they wish. The Handmaids are taught special phrases they can use when they go shopping in pairs, and this is also the only communication they are officially allowed to have. So when *The Handmaid’s Tale* is compared to *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, it becomes clear that in some ways the authorities of the Republic of Gilead have gone even further than the authorities of Oceania. Instead of deleting some words and some meanings from the language and providing the lower classes with specialised machine-written literature, the authorities of Gilead have tried to prevent the Handmaids using creative language altogether. Even though the ultimate aim of Newspeak is

orthodoxy through the abolishing of thought through restricting language, it is a more gradual process, which is thought to be forced upon the public unnoticed by the public itself. In the Republic of Gilead the authorities have openly demonstrated their omnipotence by forcing the Handmaids to use the new language overnight.

In certain social surroundings the authorities of Gilead have tried to forbid women from using language on the whole or restricted their speech to certain acceptable words and phrases. When Offred and Ofglen go shopping some of the few phrases they can safely use are “blessed be the fruit,” “may the Lord open,” “praise be,” and “which I receive with joy” (Atwood 1996: 29). Those words and phrases work similarly to Newspeak in *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, as their aim is to prevent people from discussing certain ideas, if not even trying to forbid the people to have those ideas altogether. Thereby, these phrases have also been designed to remind the speakers of orthodoxy. All conversation beyond those safe phrases is possibly dangerous and could be overheard by someone else and the speakers could be reported to the authorities. Most of the genuine conversations the Handmaids have take place in short whispers, be it the pieces of information shared on a Birth Day when there are more opportunities for speaking with each other – “[o]n this day we can do anything we want. I revise that: within limits” (Atwood 1996: 122) –, when waiting in a queue for the shop to open – “I’ve heard that rumor, passed on to me in soundless words, the lips hardly moving, as we stood in line outside, waiting for the store to open, lured by the picture of succulent white fillets in the window” (Atwood 1996: 173) –, or at some of the mass gatherings where every move of the Handmaids is scrutinised by someone – “[d]on’t look at me,” [Ofglen] says. “They’re watching” (Atwood 1996: 292). The Handmaids pass on their real names from bed to bed in the Red Center without making a sound, reading from each other’s lips. In a society where reading is strictly forbidden, even the act of lip-reading is a form of rebellion. For them there is no English language as it

used to be, but rather a clipped and silenced language that has not been turned cryptic by the authorities directly as it was in *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, but rather indirectly by the circumstances and the new social order created by those authorities. The Handmaids use this silenced alternative language, because the official language directly forced on the Handmaids by the authorities in the form of the ready-made phrases is too narrow to be used at all. The outcome of the language policy is even more drastic than that of Oceania though – in Gilead the silence, at least for the Handmaids, is made more complete. They are regarded as vessels and birth machines, not human beings and this idea is supported by making them silent. They are a “muted group” in almost the literal sense of the word (cf. Ardener 1975, qtd. in Henley and Kramarae 1991: 23).

When they do have the opportunity to communicate, the scarce words they can hastily produce take on not one meaning as desired in Oceania, but rather a multiple of different or even opposite meanings. One of the instances when this happens is a conversation between Offred and the new Ofglen when they are on their way shopping for the first time. Offred suggests that they should go to the Wall, and Ofglen answers “as you like,” but after having a look at the bodies hanging there, she says “[I]et that be a reminder to us” (Atwood 1996: 295). Offred, however, has trouble interpreting this answer and thinks the following:

I say nothing at first, because I am trying to make out what she means. She could mean that this is a reminder to us of the unjustness and brutality of the regime. In that case I ought to say *yes*. Or she could mean the opposite, that we should remember to do what we are told and not get into trouble, because if we do we will be rightfully punished. If she means that, I should say *praise be*. Her voice was bland, toneless, no clues there. (Atwood 1996: 295-296)

Here the official phrase “let that be a reminder to us” can be interpreted in two opposite ways depending on the degree of orthodoxy of the speaker and listener and in those particular circumstances can also take on a meaning not intended by the authorities, thus demonstrating the impossibility of forbidding the Handmaids to use their wits for free interpretations. Moreover, here the new language proves to be a failure according to the

principles of Newspeak, because though the phrases are formally perfect, they lack meaning altogether and therefore can take on multiple meanings at once.

However, it is not only the Handmaids who are silenced in Gilead, but the Commanders' Wives as well. Serena Joy used to be socially active in the public sphere in the world as it used to be, but in the Republic of Gilead she has lost her social position and has been tied to home to her flowers and knitting with some odd visits from the other Wives. Serena Joy, whose silence is not as complete as Offred's, lacks something very highly valued in the society of Gilead – fertility – and her lack of speech symbolically demonstrates her inability to be useful in the society.

The Handmaid's Tale, similarly to *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, also supports the idea of language being the principal support of the dream of absolute power with the difference that here language has been taken away from those who have been stripped of power by the authorities and then given to the powerful ones. However, this kind of arrangement seems not to be working either as those, who have been ripped of most of the language have found ways to reclaim some of it by turning it into short, but meaningful whispers and lip-reading. Similarly to Winston, Offred starts a diary, but if compared to Winston, she breaks the rules even more, as she, in addition to performing the forbidden act of keeping a diary, also uses language, which she is not supposed to do. What is more, she physically uses her voice and speaks up, as lip-reading would have been useless on a recorded tape and whispers would not have been audible either.

Based on the discussion so far, the main argument of the present thesis could be formulated: while the authorities of the totalitarian Republic of Gilead in Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale* have made every attempt to silence the Handmaids, and by extension, render them powerless, the Handmaids still have power in the Gileadean society. To explore the sources and functioning of this power, the following chapter will provide a

close reading of Atwood's novel with a focus on power relationships as expressed through language between Offred and the Commander's Wife as well as Offred and the Commander.

2 DUAL POWER RELATIONSHIPS IN MARGARET ATWOOD'S *THE HANDMAID'S TALE*

In my reading the main idea behind *The Handmaid's Tale* is that the Handmaids do have power in the Gileadean society, and this power can be seen in their relationship with people officially on a higher position than them. Since words are scarce, elliptical sentences and even silences become very important. In the two subchapters of this chapter the flexible power relationships between Offred and Serena Joy, the Commander's Wife, and Offred and the Commander are analysed, because these appear to be the most dynamic and complex relationships in the novel and therefore these are also the relationships that have been chosen for the analysis in the empirical part of the present thesis.

For Atwood power is described in terms of "who's allowed to do what to whom, who gets away with it and how" (qtd. in Rubenstein 2001: 12). However, it is not as simple as that. The power relationships in *The Handmaid's Tale* are not black and white, but rather complicated and even flexible. This makes answering the seemingly simple question of who has power over whom extremely difficult. In the reduced circumstances the Handmaids have learned to use every source of power they can think of. Offred cleverly uses the power of her body, of sanity, of knowledge, of ownership and of the word every way she can. According to Bourdieu, the position of a person in the social space is determined by all the positions occupied by that person in the different fields and the powers that are active in each of them (1997: 230). Therefore, the position of Offred is also defined not only by her official position as a Handmaid, but also by her unofficial position as a woman who secretly collaborates both with Serena Joy and the Commander. What is more, Bourdieu has stated that "[t]he person who has nothing is an unconditional supporter" (1997: 217), but even though the Handmaids have been stripped of language, they still have their fertility, which is their greatest weapon against society, because this

makes them valuable. In the society of Gilead Offred can also be considered a delegate in the terms of Bourdieu, whom delegation enables to exist in the form of a fictitious person (1997: 209) who tells, therefore the group is (Atwood 1996: 279) and exists only through the group and with only a single goal in mind – to escape from the same group she lives in. For the twenty-first century historians Offred resembles a fictitious person, whom they find hard to take seriously, but whose story represents the stories of the other Handmaids. Her story also shows resistance of the whole group through the resistance of a single member of that group. So the two main sources of power Offred has are the power of her language and the power of her body, the latter being so great that “[e]ven the Commander is subject to its whims” (Atwood 1996: 91). Chris Ferns has pointed out that *The Handmaid’s Tale* demonstrates that the more the state tries to gain power, the more there appear instances where resistance is possible – “[t]he more that is forbidden, the greater the number of potentially subversive actions becomes” (1989: 379). Although Offred is quite passive at first glance, even her apparent passivity, just her existence, creates a supportive space for the resistance of others (Ferns 1989: 379).

Before Offred’s relationships can be analysed, it is important to trace the way her position changes in the society, as her relationships also change in the course of the novel. Offred is a victim in the Gileadean society, who, by definition, does not have much symbolic power or linguistic capital, but who does not remain on the same victim position in Atwood’s term till the end, but is clever enough to gain power and move on. According to Atwood’s four basic victim positions that she proposed in *Survival: A Thematic Guide to Canadian Literature* (1991: 36), Offred sees herself as a victim at the beginning of her story, but, by the end of it, she reaches the third victim position “[by acknowledging] the fact that [she] is a victim, but [by refusing] to accept the assumptions that the role is inevitable” (Atwood 1991: 37) or even slightly beyond, by becoming what may be termed

as a creative victim, a new category in between Atwood's third and fourth basic victim positions. If Offred manages to break out of Gilead, she will reach the fourth position – that of an ex-victim, as no one can take on the position of an ex-victim in an oppressed society (Atwood 1991: 38). In order to further elaborate on how Offred's position changes through her interactions with the Commander and Serena Joy, the two following sub-chapters will focus on a detailed analysis of these relationships and especially the conversations between Offred and the Commander's Wife, and Offred and the Commander.

2.1 Offred and the Commander's Wife

The power relationship between the Handmaids and the Wives is a very equivocal one, because both have power over each other and this causes ongoing battles for status. Offred's and Serena Joy's very fluid and flexible power relationship is not exemplified only in their short but significant conversations, which become even more important as only subject they have anything to say to each other is that of fertility, but also in how Offred sees Serena Joy and what she notices in the Wife's behaviour and her surroundings. According to the views of Bourdieu power comes into the language from outside, the different social positions of the Handmaid and the Wife are the key factors which determine the way of their conversations. In this subchapter the images demonstrating the incapacity of the Wives, the opportunities to show their power and the flexible power relationship between Offred and Serena Joy are discussed. Before the analysis of their power relationship as evidenced through language, the following paragraphs concentrate on Serena Joy's official and actual position in the society as those are not the same, which profoundly affects the relationship of the two women.

In the society, where Serena Joy is the Wife of the Commander who is at the very top, one might assume that, in Bourdieu's terms, she has been given enough power by the institution of the state to be an equal partner to her husband, in reality the Wives do not have any considerable privileges. Though officially the whole household is to be managed by the Wives, there are certain things they cannot control and, crucially, one of those things is the presence of a Handmaid in their household. The Handmaids, who have been clearly lowered to the position of vessels for bearing children and belong to their Commander even by their name, seem not to have been given any power in the society. However, as the analysis will demonstrate, this is not the case.

For the authorities the Handmaids are not whole human beings but just body parts (Rubenstein 2001: 14) – “two-legged wombs, that's all” (Atwood 1996: 146). Rubenstein has found multiple other examples of mutilated bodies in the novel – the doctor never sees the Handmaids' face, but “deals with a torso only” (Atwood 1996: 70), the ceiling ornament in Offred's room is “like the place in a face where the eye has been taken out” (Atwood 1996: 17) and there is the network of informants called the Eyes (2001: 14). Offred often uses “the imagery of mutilation and dismemberment” (Rubenstein 2001: 14) in her own language, by saying that the accounts of the past are reconstructions and by trying to make her thoughts and her body a functioning whole again. What is more, even the language she is forced to use in Gilead is not healthy and whole, but “amputated speech” (Atwood 1996: 211) and her whole story “limping and mutilated” (Atwood 1996: 279). In the case of the Handmaids their bodies are so predominant that bodily images enter their language quite frequently and add weight to their words. To dissolve the power of their language one has to abolish the power of their fertility, through the mutilation of their body by tearing it to smaller pieces so that the whole would be irreparable. This

happens at Particutions, the most violent acts in the Republic of Gilead, the mood of which is infectious, as Offred puts it – “I want to tear, gouge, rend” (Atwood: 1996: 291).

Similarly to the Handmaids, the Wives also mostly sit at home like prisoners. To add interest to their lives, the Wives have a tacit list to take turns and be sick in bed, because they can only go out alone in the evenings to visit another sick Wife (Atwood 1996: 162) and therefore, as Offred ironically points out, “[t]hey get sick a lot, these Wives of the Commanders” (Atwood 1996: 162). Offred recognises Serena Joy as a former singer and she very wittily thinks of Serena Joy as somebody having a “former and now amputated glory” (Atwood 1996: 64). Offred remembers that in the past Serena Joy had wanted women to stay at home and now she has definitely achieved that. However, she did not realise it would be her as well, staying at home, being miserable, having nothing to do. Offred sees through Serena Joy and thinks “[h]ow furious she must be, now that she’s been taken at her word” (Atwood 1996: 56). As a consequence, the Wife has become speechless. Not only Handmaids but also the Wives have been silenced by the regime. Here again the power of language is emphasised, showing that it does not work only towards but also against one’s goals.

The Wives of the Commanders are represented as pathetic and lacking, because most of the Wives are barren. Serena Joy, for instance, is very often in various ways linked to flowers. Offred remarks that “they’re the genital organs of plants” (Atwood 1996: 91) and therefore emphasises the incapability of Serena Joy and her desire to be fruitful at the same time. Similarly to Serena Joy, her TV-set is broken down, since its colours need adjusting (Atwood 1996: 92) and the greenish-yellow skin of a singer or sickly yellow trees are as abnormal and distorted as the whole life in Gilead. The Wives resent their Handmaids as intruders to their territory because the maids are the representatives and the reminders of the Wives’ infertility. For Serena Joy Offred is an object, not a human being. She is a

reproach and a necessity (Atwood 1996: 23) or a business transaction (Atwood 1996: 25) or a piece of furniture (Atwood 1996: 89): Serena Joy often puts her hand on Offred's shoulder to steady herself (Atwood 1996: 89). On the one hand, she thereby shows her weakness and poor health, but on the other hand, by putting her hand down on the shoulder of the Handmaid, she lets the Handmaid know who should be in charge.

Having lost the ability to bear children in a society where fruitfulness means everything, the Wives do not have much to do in the Republic of Gilead. To keep the Wives busy with something and to give them a sense of purpose, they have gardens to "maintain and care for" (Atwood 1996: 22) and they also knit endless scarves for the Angles at war (Atwood 1996: 22). Serena Joy is so desperate to have a child that her scarves do not have the usual cross-and-star pattern, but she rather puts her desire into her work by knitting too elaborate scarves with fir trees, eagles or human figures that would better suit children than grown-up men at the front lines. She is knitting more and more yards of useless wool people, "her form of procreation" (Atwood 1996: 162) as Offred wittily remarks. However, Offred realises later that Serena Joy might feel physical pain when she knits those scarves and so the scarves become the "evidence of her stubbornness, and not altogether despicable" (Atwood 1996: 214).

To compensate for their miserable life, the Wives are desperate to be in control, so they show their power through insignificant things, like withholding hand lotion from the Handmaids (Atwood 1996: 107). They have forbidden its use, just to show that they have enough power to do so, excusing themselves by stating that because the Handmaids are containers, it is only the insides of their bodies that are important and "[t]he outside can become hard and wrinkled" (Atwood 1996: 107). Meanwhile, by showing their power, the Wives have also unconsciously let the Handmaids know that they are afraid of them as younger competitors and do not want them to look too attractive (Atwood 1996: 107).

Even though Serena Joy desperately tries to show her power to the Handmaid, Offred is actually “controlled” by a bitter woman who is not able to control even herself. For instance, Serena Joy always cries at the night of the Ceremony, even though she tries to preserve her dignity and not to make a sound, “[t]he tension between her lack of control and her attempt to suppress it is horrible” (Atwood 1996: 101). During the Ceremony Serena Joy sits above Offred and her position should signify that she is in charge “of the process and thus of the product. If any” (Atwood 1996: 104), while actually she cannot control anything. The outcome depends on Offred and the Commander and the Wife is useless. On Birth Day Offred thinks how ridiculous the Wife of Ofwarren’s Commander is as she sits on the Birthing Stool above Janine and the other Wives treat her as if she were the one in labour. That and letting them name the children the Handmaids give birth to are attempts to make the Wives more important than they actually are.

Offred feels superior to Serena Joy, who is bent and shrunken, whereas Offred herself is invaluable as the healthy and fruitful one. Offred emphasises Serena Joy’s physical disabilities at every chance by telling that she is limping, that she has to lean on her cane or has to put her leg up on the footstool. Offred knows, though, that it would be “[a] mistake to notice weakness in her” (Atwood 1996: 215) as even Aunt Lydia warns the Handmaids that “[i]t’s not the husbands you have to watch out for, [...] it’s the Wives” (Atwood 1996: 56). She even asks the maids to attempt to feel for the Wives, because in the households the maids are under the jurisdiction of the Wives alone, the Wives have the power to decide the future of the Handmaids and therefore it is necessary to be on relatively good terms with them. Nevertheless, the sphere of power of the Wives is limited as well. For instance, even though they are allowed to hit the Handmaid, they are not allowed to use anything except their hand to do so. The punishment for killing the Handmaid is execution. Offred sees Serena Joy cutting off the seedpods of tulips with a pair of shears in the garden. She is

doing it with a “compulsive jerk of hands” (Atwood 1996: 161) that might be due to her arthritis or “some blitzkrieg, some kamikaze, committed on the swelling genitalia of the flowers” (Atwood 1996: 161). Serena Joy would probably want to do this very same thing with Offred. She would like to seek revenge for Offred’s fertility. But the Wife lacks the power to harm Offred and so she has to make do with hurting innocent flowers.

After the meetings in the Commander’s office, Offred feels a little different about Serena Joy. The hatred is “no longer pure and simple” (Atwood 1996: 170), there is some other dimension to it. Offred feels guilty about the meetings, because she is the intruder in the territory that ought to be the Wife’s. “I was taking something away from her, although she didn’t know it” (Atwood 1996: 170). By doing something without Serena Joy knowing gave Offred the feeling that “I now had power over her, of a kind, although she didn’t know it. And I enjoyed that. Why pretend? I enjoyed it a lot” (Atwood 1996: 171).

The official social position of Serena Joy and Offred as well as their feelings towards each other can be felt in their conversations discussed in the following paragraphs. The relativity of Offred’s and Serena Joy’s power over each other is wonderfully exemplified in the scene where the Wife makes Offred the proposition involving Nick. In this conversation Serena Joy has to emphasise and re-emphasise her power because in reality she has no control over whether Offred gets pregnant or not, but it is rather she who is dependent on the Handmaid’s fertility. Their conversation begins with the following dialogue that is turned into a monologue by the Wife.

I lower my eyes to the path [...], hoping to be invisible, knowing I’ll be ignored. But not this time.

“Offred,” she says.

I pause, uncertain.

“Yes, you.”

I turn towards her my blinkered sight.

“Come over here. I want you.”

I walk over the grass and stand before her, looking down.

“You can sit,” she says. “Here, take the cushion. I need you to hold this wool.” (Atwood 1996: 213)

The Commander's Wife has been clearly given less authority and power from the institution than the Commander, but she is more desperate to show it off to Offred. For Serena Joy Offred is a thing to be bossed around and so she does not bother to politely ask Offred to help her, but rather executes her power of performative utterances by just saying "I want you." Serena Joy is very abrupt and authoritative when speaking with Offred, because she tries to demonstrate to the Handmaid that she has the power to bully her around. Serena Joy shows harshness, because what she is about to tell Offred is a very delicate subject matter for her and she has to make clear who holds more power in this conversation. What is more, before offering her deal to Offred, Serena Joy fits the skein of wool over Offred's outstretched hands and Offred feels "cobwebbed" (Atwood 1996: 213). Like an evil spider, the Wife has trapped the Handmaid into her web to show that she is in control and that Offred is in no position to refuse her offer. There seems to be a clash between the power given to Serena Joy by the institution and the power which comes from the social situation of talking to a fertile Handmaid. In a sense fertility becomes the institution which gives ultimate power to the Handmaids, but this power is a side effect of the social order and not to be recognised officially. Serena Joy and Offred both sense the difference between Offred's official and actual position and therefore while the Wife tries to emphasise her superiority whenever she can, Offred remains cautious and polite, but at the same time alert to all possible signs of the Wife's failure to live up to the power given to her. The language Serena Joy uses makes it very clear that she would not appreciate it if Offred tried to talk back to her:

"Well then," Serena says. /.../ "Nothing yet?"

I know what she's talking about. There are not that many subjects that could be spoken about, between us; there's not much common ground, except this one mysterious and chancy thing.

"No," I say. "Nothing."

"Too bad," she says. /.../

"Your time's running out," she says. Not a question, a matter of fact.

"Yes," I say neutrally. (Atwood 1996: 214)

Serena Joy does not introduce the topic in any way to Offred, but rather starts off right away, assuming that Offred understands her without any explanations. Offred's pregnancy is the only connecting subject matter they can talk about and it is also the one where words are not needed and they seem to understand each other without saying everything. In a way the economy of language brings into mind Orwell's Newspeak, as it is as cryptic and as abrupt. However, it is lacking in clarity as Offred can interpret Serena Joy's next utterance in more than one ways, because the market plays a role in creating the meaning of the discourse and after trying to measure the Wife's utterance first against its most common meaning and then against the specific meaning of that particular social context, Offred is not quite sure whether the Wife is violating the rules or not:

“Maybe he can't,” she says.
 I don't know who she means. Does she mean the Commander, or God? If it's God, she should say *won't*. Either way it's heresy. /.../
 “No,” I say. “Maybe he can't.”
 I look up at her. She looks down.
 “Maybe,” she says, holding the cigarette, which she has failed to light. “Maybe you should try it another way.” (Atwood 1996: 215)

The power of Serena Joy's words is not enough to demonstrate Offred that the Wife is in the position to start a conversation about the topic of crossing the line, so her language is supported by her physical position where she can look *down* at Offred. Offred has to look *up* and their eyes meet. At the same time Offred notices yet another failure in connection with Serena Joy – the fact that she has not been able to light the cigarette. Nevertheless, from that moment onwards they are conspirators, sharing a mutual secret and a mutual goal. After making the proposition to Offred, Serena Joy makes it clear to her that she is the one who has the knowledge that those things are done and that she is the one who is in the position to help Offred out by making “sure nothing went wrong” (Atwood 1996: 215). However, in addition to acknowledging her own deficiency and poor health, Serena Joy has also acknowledged the Commander's inability to be fruitful, pronouncing the idea that in that sense they are both inferior to Offred.

“Not with a doctor,” I say.

“No,” she agrees, and for this moment at least we are cronies, this could be a kitchen table, it could be a date we’re discussing, some girlish stratagem of ploys and flirtation. “Sometimes they blackmail. But it doesn’t have to be a doctor. It could be someone we trust.”

“Who?” I say.

“I was thinking of Nick,” she says, and her voice is almost soft. “He’s been with us a long time. He’s loyal. I could fix it with him.” (Atwood 1996: 215-216)

Here the power either of them holds changes again. Offred refuses to risk it with a doctor and Serena Joy actually agrees with her, letting Offred think for a moment that the Handmaid had a say in the decision. As it turns out a moment later, the Wife had thought it through beforehand, as she says she had been already thinking about Nick.

“What about the Commander?” I say.

“Well,” she says, with firmness /.../. “We just won’t tell him, will we?”

This idea hangs between us, almost visible, almost palpable: heavy, formless, dark; collusion of a sort, betrayal of a sort. She does want that baby.

“It’s a risk,” I say. “More than that.” It’s my life on the line; but that’s where it will be sooner or later, one way or another, whether I do or don’t. We both know this.

“You might as well,” she says. Which is what I think too.

“All right,” I say. “Yes.” (Atwood 1996: 216)

During the next lines Offred and Serena Joy become an inclusive ‘we’, who share a secret and have both something to win and to lose. Offred sees through Serena Joy and realises that the Wife really wants the baby and at the same time she wants Offred gone too, she would “like [her] pregnant /.../, over and done with and out of the way” (Atwood 1996: 214). However, she wants Offred gone with flying colours, leaving Serena Joy a healthy baby to take care of. She does not want another Handmaid in her house after Offred has proven a failure, since she wants her life to be more normal and she wants her husband only for herself. Therefore, in this conversation with Offred Serena Joy has a lot at stake and she has to play her cards right, because “[t]o want is to have a weakness” (Atwood 1996: 146). Offred senses the Wife’s very strong desire to have the baby and realises that this is Serena Joy’s weak spot. Offred herself does not have much to lose either and she also senses that she cannot possibly decline Serena Joy’s offer, so she is ready to take the chances. Serena Joy, however, also senses that Offred has seen a weakness in her and

therefore needs to regain her power. Hence she takes great care to become the ultimate winner of the conversation by offering Offred the photo of her little daughter, indicating that she has known about her little girl all along but kept it a secret from the Handmaid.

She leans forward. "Maybe I could get something for you," she says. Because I have been good. "Something you want," she adds, wheedling almost.

"What's that?" I say. I can't think of anything I truly want that she'd be likely or able to give me.

"A picture," she says, as if offering me some juvenile treat, an ice cream, a trip to the zoo. I look up at her again, puzzled.

"Of her," she says. "Your little girl. But only maybe." (Atwood 1996: 216)

By offering Offred something she wants just as much as the Wife wants the baby, Serena Joy has restored her position in power and made it clear to Offred that the Wife can have things the Handmaid cannot. Offred tries to suppress her anger towards Serena Joy for not letting her know sooner by repeating to herself that "I can't say this, I can't lose sight, even of so small a thing. I can't let go of this hope. I can't speak" (Atwood 1996: 216). After the Wife's proposition, Offred also loses control over the situation she had had just a moment ago with her power of pregnancy, because now Serena Joy has the photo she wants and the Wife has won the battle, though not the whole war. The Wife, at the same time, is "actually smiling, coquettishly even" (Atwood 1996: 216), being obviously pleased with her little move. She is also cunning enough to let "her former small-screen mannequin's allure" (Atwood 1996: 216) come forward, because she knows that the time is running out for Offred and that the maid has few chances left to escape the Colonies. Therefore the Wife does not want to make an impression she is doing Offred a favour of saving her life out of kind-heartedness.

However, Serena Joy goes even further in showing Offred who is in charge of the situation and gives the Handmaid a cigarette, by saying "'[o]nly the one though,' /.../ 'We don't want to ruin your health!'" (Atwood 1996: 217). Here she calls them 'we' again, but this 'we' is not the inclusive 'we' of not telling the Commander, but rather a mocking 'we', applied to herself alone, howing that she has the power to decide over Offred's health.

The next instance Offred and Serena Joy talk is when the Wife brings the Handmaid the photo of Offred's little girl. This conversation is very one-sided:

“I've brought it for you,” says Serena Joy.

/.../

“You can only have it for a minute,” Serena Joy says, her voice low and conspiratorial. “I have to return it, before they know it's missing.” (Atwood 1996: 240)

Offred does not say anything, but tries to control her emotions, thinking that “[b]etter she'd brought me nothing” (Atwood 1996: 240). Here the Wife is clearly the one who has more power, as she has arranged something completely illegal, and she is also the only one who uses words and speaks, letting Offred stay in silence. She has shown Offred that she can do such things and made it clear that she has also risked with something for Offred.

Another interesting power game between Offred and Serena Joy, involving a word-play, takes place in the scene when Offred goes to Nick's room for the first time. Offred tells her that the searchlights were off that night. In her mind Offred thinks that it was “[a] power failure. Or else Serena Joy has arranged it” (Atwood 1996: 271). Since Serena Joy had promised Offred to “make sure nothing went wrong” (Atwood 1996: 215), Offred suspects her of possessing the power of arranging the searchlights to be off. Though officially the Commander's Wife should not have power of that kind, she has let her Handmaid see that she is the woman who has secret sources of power, the more so as she has already given some hints about those sources by demonstrating her black market possessions (Atwood 1996: 24). What is more, here the word *power* could mean two different things, *electricity* and *authority*. Electricity gives the Guardians their power, because otherwise they would not be able to see anything, on the other hand, Offred's opinion that maybe the Wife arranged the darkness shows Serena Joy's power over the Guardians and over the Handmaid as well, for Offred is ready to believe in the powerfulness of the Wife. Offred is also wondering what she has done about the guardians, “paid them off somehow, I hope: cigarettes, whiskey” (Atwood 1996: 272).

The scene starts with Serena Joy coming to Offred's room. Offred, hearing her cane, senses her incapacity: "I can hear her, a faint tapping, a faint shuffling on the muffling rug of the corridor, before her light knock comes", but once again, Offred does not say anything, but rather follows the Wife in complete silence down the stairs, noting that "[s]he can walk faster, she's stronger than I thought" (Atwood 1996: 271). At the same time Offred also tries to see the weakness of wanting by remarking that "[h]er left hand clamps the banister, in pain maybe but holding on, steadying her. I think: she's biting her lip, she's suffering. She wants it all right, that baby" (Atwood 1996: 271). However, at the same night Offred hears Serena Joy whispering in the kitchen for the first time and thinks that it is "odd, to hear her whispering, as if she is one of us" (Atwood 1996: 271-272), because Wives usually do not lower their voices (Atwood 1996: 272). Serena Joy will also be waiting for Offred, protecting her and lying for her if somebody should come into the kitchen at night. Offred sees that the Wife will be "adroit enough to lie well" (Atwood 1996: 272), referring to the fact that Serena Joy is good with using words and arguments. But there is yet something that Offred knows and the Wife does not and this has to do with the Commander, namely that the Wife is sure her husband is in his bedroom upstairs and "won't come down this late, he never does", to which Offred adds in her thoughts: "[t]hat's what she thinks" (Atwood 1996: 271-272), taking secret pleasure in knowing more about the Commander's habits than Serena Joy herself.

One more example of Offred's and Serena Joy's constantly changing power relationship can be seen when Serena Joy has found out about Offred's and the Commander's secret meetings.

Serena Joy has come out of the front door; she's standing on the steps. She calls to me. /.../
 On the top step she towers above me. Her eyes flare, hot blue against the shriveled white of her skin. I look away from her face, down at the ground; at her feet, the tip of her cane.
 "I trusted you," she says. "I tried to help you."
 Still I don't look up at her. Guilt pervades me, I've been found out, but for what? /.../
 "Well?" she asks. "Nothing to say for yourself?"
 I look up at her. "About what?" I manage to stammer. /.../

“Look,” she says. She brings her free hand from behind her back. It’s her cloak she’s holding, the winter one. “There was lipstick on it,” she says. “How could you be so vulgar? I *told* him...” /.../ “Behind my back,” she says. “You could have left me something.” Does she love him, after all? She raises her cane. I think she is going to hit me, but she doesn’t. “Pick up that disgusting thing and get to your room. Just like the other one. A slut. You’ll end up the same.” (Atwood 1996: 299)

The Wife shows her power to the Handmaid by towering above her on the steps, but still Offred also notices her cane. A moment later the Wife shows weakness by losing control over herself and saying to the Handmaid that she could have left her something. With this sentence she accepts the idea that the Commander had preferred Offred to his wife and that the maid had had enough power to take her husband away from her. Offred’s secret power over the Wife has become a reality. After the desperate outburst, Serena Joy composes herself though, calls Offred a slut, threatens her that she will find an end similar to that of her predecessor and sends her to her room. Nevertheless, only the fact that Serena Joy had lost her calm and burst out shows her weakness. It is only later, at the end of Offred’s story when she is taken away in the black van, when she leaves Serena Joy standing “in the hallway, under the mirror, looking up, incredulous” (Atwood 1996: 306) and puzzled as she had not been responsible for calling the Eyes (Atwood 1996: 306). Though Offred herself does not know exactly where she is going to be taken, she manages to leave the Wife also in the darkness, empty-handed and with no child to take care of.

In conclusion, the power relationship between Offred and Serena Joy is a very dynamic one, because they both have power over each other in turn or are placed on the same level of power from time to time. As far as the register in Offred’s and the Wife’s conversations is concerned, they seem to be on slightly more formal terms than Offred and the Commander, whose no less complicated power relationship is discussed in the following subchapter.

2.2 Offred and the Commander

Offred's relationship with the Commander is quite as complex and fluid as that with Serena Joy, but their power game seems to be more playful; both in that they actually play a board game and in their more relaxed relationship. In this subchapter Offred's and the Commander's relationship, including their games of Scrabble, in the Commander's private study is discussed. Similarly to the conversations with Serena Joy, the conversations between Offred and the Commander get a lot of their power from the position of the speakers as well as from the surroundings in Bourdieu's terms. The Commander, who is among the authorities in Gilead has been given a great deal of power by the institution of the state. When Offred and the Commander meet, his power is emphasised by their meeting place, Commander's private study, and by everything that he has in the study that comes from life as it used to be. Interestingly enough, the Commander does not emphasise his power every time he speaks with Offred, but rather tries to be delicate and understanding and meet Offred half way. It seems that he is not as desperate to be in control of the situation as Serena Joy, because he actually is in control, at least more than his Wife.

Before Offred goes into the Commander's private study, she stands at the door of the forbidden room and thinks:

So why does he want to see me, at night, alone?

If I'm caught, it's to Serena's tender mercies I'll be delivered. He isn't supposed to meddle in such household discipline, that's women's business. After that, reclassification. I could become an Unwoman.

But to refuse to see him could be worse. There's no doubt about who holds the real power.

But there must be something he wants, from me. To want is to have a weakness. It's this weakness, whatever it is, that entices me. It's like a small crack in a wall, before now impenetrable. If I press my eye to it, this weakness of his, I may be able to see my way clear.

I want to know what he wants.

I raise my hand, knock, on the door of this forbidden room where I have never been, where women do not go. Not even Serena Joy comes here, and the cleaning is done by Guardians. (Atwood 1996: 146)

When Offred is asked to come to the Commander's office, she knows that it is strictly forbidden, but she still has to take the chances, because she cannot possibly refuse, since "[t]here's no doubt about who holds the real power" (Atwood 1996: 146). In the matters of the household the person who has the most power is the Wife, not the Commander at all. He has power in other spheres of life instead, but since those spheres are superior to the domestic sphere, he is also the one who has the real and ultimate power. Offred makes it clear to herself what could happen when she is caught and what would happen when she refuses to go and concludes that it is the Commander who is in charge and there is nothing she can do about it. However, she enters the study with the hope of finding a weakness in the Commander and this shows that she has not given up fight and the circumstances have not broken her will-power. In her opinion wanting something is a weakness, and if this is so, the Commander also has weaknesses, though Offred does not yet know what he wants from her. Offred thinks of her meetings with the Commander as a conspiracy (Atwood 1996: 149). The word suggests that the parties involved should be more or less equal, otherwise it would be blackmailing. In a conspiracy they both want something from each other and they both have something to lose. Conspirators have a common goal and this makes the power relationship between Offred and the Commander more equal than it used to be before.

Going into the Commander's private study is very tempting because even the Wife is not allowed to go there and Offred thinks about it as "a bargaining session, things are about to be exchanged" (Atwood 1996: 148). So she waits for the Commander to say what he wants from her, but realises that he is not as sure about his wishes as one might expect.

If there's to be a bargain, the terms of exchange must be set forth. This was something he certainly had not done. I thought he might be toying, some cat-and-mouse routine, but now I think that his motives and desires weren't obvious even to him. They had not yet reached the level of words (Atwood 1996: 163).

The Commander's real desires remain unfathomable to Offred for a while and at long last Offred realises that the Commander does not know himself what he really wants (Atwood 1996: 163). This shows his weakness, because "[t]o want is to have a weakness" (Atwood 1996: 146). If not knowing is a weakness and if wanting is a weakness as well then not knowing what one wants is a double weakness. The Commander's motives have to reach the level of words and have to become pronounced so that the words could make his desires known and give his wishes the power Offred cannot object to. Until he himself does not know how to formulate his wishes, they do not have enough power to be fulfilled during the hours spent in the Commander's private study.

After spending time with the Commander, Offred's attitude towards the Commander changes. While she is afraid of him at first and sees him as someone having authority and power, but nothing else, then in the long run she starts sensing some insecure and indecisive traits in his behaviour. Offred knows that she is in no position to set any terms of exchange: these have to be set by the Commander who has the power to do so. She takes him to be cunning and looks for hidden reasons behind his behaviour, but shortly reaches the conclusion that maybe he is not trying to deceive her after all and he himself does not know what the terms are.

When Offred opens the door of the Commander's office, she finds that "[w]hat is on the other side is normal life" (Atwood 1996: 147). The Commander does not like the present order, so he has kept the things in his office how they used to be in the past. This is a great temptation for Offred, because the Commander's room is "an oasis of the forbidden" (Atwood 1996: 147) and she has to admit that there is "something hilarious about it" (Atwood 1996: 154), because "[t]his is freedom, an eyeblink of it" (Atwood 1996: 149). To emphasise that this really is another world in his private study, the Commander even says 'hello' to Offred – "[i]t's the old form of greeting. I haven't heard it

for a long time, for years. Under the circumstances it seems out of place, comical even, a flip backward in time, a stunt” (Atwood 1996: 147). In addition to belonging to the past, it also demonstrates that the Commander has enough power and linguistic as well as political capital to manipulate the market and create a profit of distinction for his own advantage, because at this point of their relationship Offred is not in the position to answer in the same register. However, as their relationship evolves, the Commander loses this advantage, since Offred starts to use almost the same language as he does, even though the language Offred is officially allowed to use is that of the few ready-made phrases, which also show the official linguistic competence of the Handmaids. As mentioned above, according to Bourdieu, the state creates a unified linguistic market, where only the official language is accepted and this official language is the language taught to children at school. In Gilead the official language is the language taught to the Handmaids in the Red Centers and it includes the few phrases accepted by the new society. The phrases used by Offred and Ofglen include the accepted way of greeting “blessed be the fruit” and answering the greeting “may the Lord open” (Atwood 1996: 29), as well as saying good-bye “under His Eye” (Atwood 1996: 54), but they also include some other accepted phrases like “praise be”, “which I receive with joy” or “we’ve been sent good weather” (Atwood 1996: 29). The Commander on purpose does not use the new official phrases and employs the old greeting just to demonstrate from the very start that he has the power to expand his official linguistic competence and that what is going to happen in his private study is not going to follow the rules of Gilead.

In the Commander’s office Offred sees a resistance, supported by the Commander’s remark “[s]ome of us /.../ retain an appreciation for the old things” (Atwood 1996: 166). He also confesses that “everyone’s human after all” (Atwood 1996: 248) and that “you can’t cheat Nature” (Atwood 1996: 249), and that therefore there exist places like

Jezebel's. Offred learns that not only the Handmaids are dissatisfied with the present situation, but also the very same men who established it. Offred feels triumphant in realising that resistance against the social order could be found in various disguises almost everywhere. Just like Serena Joy acknowledges her failure as an individual to Offred, so does the Commander as one of the initiators of the new social order by confessing that "[w]e thought we would do better" (Atwood 1996: 222). According to Bourdieu, the authorities become, in Marx's phrase, "dominated by their domination" (Bourdieu 2002: 69) and this is exactly what has happened in Gilead. By trying to subordinate the society they are suffering themselves, but they do not have anyone to blame, because they themselves have set the new rules. Even though they have been given power, they cannot use it to the full, because of the reduced circumstances which apply to all people living in the society of Gilead. The institution and its agents are connected through a complex relationship, where

the institution gives everything, starting with power over the institution, to those who have given everything to the institution, but this is because /.../ they cannot deny the institution without purely and simply denying themselves by depriving themselves of everything that they have become through and for the institution to which they owe everything. (Bourdieu 1997: 195)

The Commander has enough power to break the rules of Gilead, but even though he and many of the other Commanders are not satisfied with the new social order, they cannot undo the changes, because they have created themselves through the institution of Gilead. Should the new social order collapse, even through their own will, the power of their uniform would be taken away from them and they would cease to exist.

When the Commander pronounces his wishes to Offred at last, it is the *sheepish* way (Atwood 1996: 148, italics original) he asks her to play Scrabble and just to talk with him, that makes Offred laugh. At this point the Commander has lost most of his power in her eyes, because he looks so embarrassed and his request to play a game of Scrabble seems so ridiculous. Nevertheless, playing Scrabble is a crime as any other in the circumstances

where reading is not allowed and all human contact is officially minimised. “Now [Scrabble is] forbidden [...]. Now it’s dangerous. Now it’s indecent. [...] Now it’s desirable” (Atwood 1996: 149). For Offred language and reading become so important that it is linked with eating as one of the necessities for survival. For her the words and letters in a Scrabble game are ‘delicious’ and the counters are “like candies, made of peppermint” (Atwood 1996: 149). For Offred the game of Scrabble becomes an act of using language as if long forgotten:

[Her] tongue felt thick with the effort of spelling. It was like using a language [she]’d once known but had nearly forgotten, a language having to do with customs that had long before passed out of the world: /.../. That was the way [her] mind lurched and stumbled, among the sharp R’s and T’s, sliding over the ovoid vowels as if on pebbles. (Atwood 1996: 164)

Bourdieu’s idea of language being “the principal support of the dream of absolute power” (1997: 42) appears to work in Gilead as well, because by controlling language through restricting it, the official social order has almost succeeded in forcing Offred to forget certain words. She might be committing the illicit act of spelling, but she still cannot escape her position in the society as even the vowels remind her of her main purpose of giving birth – they are ovoid, shaped like an egg, one of the symbols of the Handmaids, being stepped on by the ruthless system of the sharp consonants, or the authorities, not actually squashing the vowels, as the language nor the society could never survive without them, but just sliding over, reminding their perpetual presence. At the same time the system is reminded that society is not built on a smoothly unified paved surface, but rather on pebbles, most of which have retained some of their sense of individuality and possibly rebellion, since they might come flying out of their place when squashed too hard.

The Commander tests Offred’s linguistic competence by asking her to play Scrabble with him as there they can spell complicated or even obsolete words and very clearly leave the level of ready-made phrases. The Commander encourages Offred to cheat at Scrabble (Atwood 1996: 220) and to symbolically break the rules of Gilead as well. Through

playing the board game the Commander cleverly shows off his power by letting Offred win the first game. Offred, however, plays by the same rules and lets him win the second (Atwood 1996: 149). This suggests that she controls the situation. She realises only later that it had been an illusion and the Commander had purposefully let her win the first one (Atwood 1996: 164). This shows how playful their power relationships are.

It seems at first that Offred has less linguistic competence because she is the one who hesitates or asks for a correct spelling of the words (Atwood 1996: 164), but the Commander is very patient with Offred and says that “*we* can always look it up in the dictionary” (Atwood 1996: 164, italics mine). By suggesting that they consult a dictionary and by using the inclusive *we* in doing so, he lowers himself to Offred’s position, because he admits that he does not know all the words and he does not tell Offred to look the word up herself, but rather offers that he could do it as well.

However, it is not always Offred who does not know the words, but the Commander as well. For instance, the Commander does not know the meaning of the word ‘zilch’, which Offred spells during one of their games (Atwood 1996: 193). According to *Longman Dictionary of Contemporary English* ‘zilch’ means ‘nothing’ (1995: 1667) and could represent the emptiness Offred actually feels when living in Gilead. Her soul is empty, but her physical body is empty too, because she is not pregnant. At the same time the archaic word ‘zilch’ could also refer to the literate culture as opposed to culture where literacy is prohibited and instead of books there is ‘nothing’. Mario Klarer argues that trying to find the origins of words and thought is “a leitmotif throughout the entire novel”: Offred constantly thinks about what words used to mean and where have the word stems come from (1995: para 18).

The very first word Offred spells in the Commander’s office is ‘larynx’, emphasising the importance of speech and voice (Andriano 1992-93: 93). On another occasion she

spells the word 'limp' (Atwood 1996: 149), possibly highlighting the deficiency of the social order that has not lived up to the majority's expectations. Yet another of her words in Scrabble is 'valance' (Atwood 1996: 149), hinting at the white wings that limit her sight. The Scrabble game is highly significant in *The Handmaid's Tale*, because spelling is seen as a kind of naming (Andriano 1992-93: 89), where one's first name is the first word one learns to spell and therefore people are very particular about the proper spelling of their names (Andriano 1992-93: 89). Offred, however, has not merely had her name misspelled, but erased altogether (Andriano 1992-93: 89). So she shows her power by naming the real circumstances around her with the words 'zilch' or 'limp', 'larynx' or 'valance', letting the readers know her attitude towards life in Gilead. Moreover, just by spelling those words, she shows off her linguistic competence as well as her education and thereby acquires some profit of distinction, because she still remembers words like 'zilch', 'larynx' or 'valance', all of which belong to the educated speech of the world as it used to be. Since the Commander does not know the meaning of 'zilch,' the liquid-like power is flowing away from his hands to those of Offred, who hold it at that particular moment. Offred seizes the power to criticize the whole system of Gilead and though she does it in the relative safety of the Commander's study, it still is an act of subverting the totalitarian order.

However, the Commander also knows how to seize his power back by making Offred want things. He humours himself by offering Offred some strictly illegal bits and pieces of the past that he knows Offred desires. Some of those illicit objects or acts are connected with the words and language, like an old copy of Vogue:

I have a little present for you, he said.

/.../

Staring at the magazine, as he dangled it before me like fish bait, I wanted it. I wanted it with a force that made the ends of my fingers ache. (Atwood 1996: 164)

The act of giving Offred a magazine which is not supposed to exist any more is an act of demonstrating power. The Commander diminishes the value of the present by calling it a 'little' one, suggesting that for him possessing an old magazine is nothing out of the ordinary. This is not the only case where he uses the diminutive "little" (Atwood 1996: 241) to diminish big and important things just to show Offred he can. He calls Offred "the fair little one" (Atwood 1996: 241), says going out with him is "a little excitement" (Atwood 1996: 241) and "a little surprise" (Atwood 1996: 241). For Offred, none of this is something she would call 'little', for instance, the magazine stands for a myriad of forgotten promises that used to exist in some other world long ago:

Though I remembered now. What was in them was promise. They dealt in transformations; they suggested an endless series of possibilities, extending like the reflections in two mirrors set facing one another, stretching on, replica after replica, to the vanishing point. They suggested one adventure after another, one wardrobe after another, one improvement after another, one man after another. They suggested rejuvenation, pain overcome and transcended, endless love. The real promise in them was immortality.

This was what he was holding, without knowing it. He riffled the pages. I felt myself leaning forward. (Atwood 1996: 165)

A simple magazine has become almost like a sacred object having the magical powers of endless life, which Offred still longs for, if not in the society of Gilead, then in some other land of secret hopes and dreams. Her desire for the magazine, which is so strong that it makes her fingertips hurt, is ruthlessly juxtaposed with the Commander's very plain, emotionless and matter-of-fact way of showing the magazine "casually enough" (Atwood 1996: 164) and saying "I thought you might like to look at it" (Atwood 1996: 165).

With that sentence Offred is brought back from her dreams to reality. She is suspicious and scared of his motives behind giving her the magazine; she thinks he might be deceiving her into an act of rebellion against the authorities and so she simply tells the Commander that it is not permitted (Atwood 1996: 165). His quiet answer – "[i]n here, it is" (Atwood 1996: 165) makes Offred to see the point, since "[h]aving broken the main taboo, why should [she] hesitate over another one, something minor? Or another, or

another; who could tell where it might stop? Behind this particular door, taboo dissolved” (Atwood 1996: 165). Since Offred had broken the main rule already, there is no point in not breaking all other rules as well. Once again, the Commander’s quietness is juxtaposed with Offred’s suppressed eagerness, but this time the Commander’s answer is not an act of showing off his power like it was when he was casually holding the magazine in front of Offred, but almost a sad statement that in Gilead not everyone can afford certain things.

The act of reading turns into an act of Offred amusing the Commander, where Offred is fully aware that the Commander is enjoying his power and the fact that this power comes from something as apparently insignificant as an old magazine – “I knew I was doing something I shouldn’t have been doing, and that he found pleasure in seeing me do it” (Atwood 1996: 165-166). Nevertheless, Offred feels that after giving him the pleasure of watching her read, she is in the position of asking a question of “[w]hy do you have this” (Atwood 1996: 166). The Commander’s answer “[s]ome of us, /.../, retain an appreciation for the old things” is the key answer from the point of view of the whole social order as this is the one demonstrating that the Commander is not content with the current social order and that he is not the only one either. By admitting something as treacherous to the system as that, he has let Offred see a glimpse of his real thoughts and feelings, reducing his power in her eyes, making him seem less authoritative and more human. Offred instinctively senses this and dares to point out that “these [magazines] were supposed to have been burned” (Atwood 1996: 166). His answer, finished by Offred,

What’s dangerous in the hands of the multitudes, he said, with what may or may not have been irony, is safe enough for those whose motives are...

Beyond reproach, I said.

He nodded gravely. Impossible to tell whether or not he meant it (Atwood 1996: 166)

makes Offred wonder about his real thoughts, since in case he really means it, it shows his genuinely embittered attitude towards and disappointment with the double standards of the society. Offred goes on to ask yet another question “why show it to me” (Atwood 1996:

166), before she realises that it is a stupid question since there is not much he could say in answer. However, the Commander's answer demonstrates the bitterness he feels and Offred is taken by surprise of his short, but sad, confession:

Who else could I show it to? he said, and there it was again, that sadness.
Should I go further? I thought. I didn't want to push him, too far, too fast. I knew I was dispensable. Nevertheless I said, too softly, How about your wife?
He seemed to think about that. No, he said. She wouldn't understand. Anyway, she won't talk to me much anymore. We don't seem to have much in common, these days.
So there it was, out in the open: his wife didn't understand him.
That's what I was there for, then. The same old thing. It was too banal to be true. (Atwood 1996: 166)

The last part of their conversation seems to be dictated by Offred at first glance. Though she is aware of her position, she also senses that she can ask the Commander about his Wife and their relationship. The Commander's answer lowers him to Offred's level, as he becomes just a disappointed husband, who is cheating his wife with a younger woman. Though Commander as a man and a husband is on the same level with Offred, and they are both cheating, the Commander as a top executive in Gilead is still superior to Offred, who feels used, but in those circumstances she can do nothing about it, because she cannot possibly refuse to come to the Commander's office or refuse to do the things he asks her to do. What is more, since there are certain advantages for Offred in the Commander's private study, it is not quite clear whether Offred would like to refuse at all.

When Offred and the Commander continue their secret meetings, Offred decides to ask for some hand lotion from him – “I didn't want to sound begging, but I wanted what I could get” (Atwood 1996: 166). The act of asking something from the Commander is an act of rebellion in itself, but Offred just keeps crossing the boundaries. She has become so comfortable with the Commander that she loses her temper when explaining to him why she could not keep the lotion in her room:

The trouble is, I said, I don't have anywhere to keep it.
In your room, he said, as if it were obvious.
They'd find it, I said. Someone would find it.
Why? he asked, as if he really didn't know. /.../

They look, I said. They look in all our rooms.
What for? he said.

I think I lost control then, a little. Razor blades, I said. Books, writing, black-market stuff. All the things we aren't supposed to have. Jesus Christ, you ought to know. My voice was angrier than I'd intended, but he didn't even wince.

Then you'll have to keep it here, he said.
So that's what I did.

He watched me smoothing it over my hands and then my face with that same air of looking in through the bars. I wanted to turn my back on him—it was as if he were in the bathroom with me—but I didn't dare.

For him, I must remember, I am only a whim. (Atwood 1996: 167-168)

The act of Offred smoothing the lotion into her skin becomes a performance given to one spectator only, the Commander, just as that of Offred reading a magazine. This makes Offred uncomfortable, but she is aware of the fact that she cannot do anything to prevent him from looking, so she just has to cope with it. Now Offred is an actress, trying to put a spell on her audience, make him follow the play, because this would give her some control over the situation and some room for making her move.

As the register they use suggests, Offred is on familiar terms with the Commander in his office and there their power-relationship takes a new turn. Offred feels secure enough to tell the Commander “[d]on't do that again” (Atwood 1996: 171) after the Commander has almost given them both away at the night of the Ceremony.

I'm sorry, he said. I didn't mean to. But I find it...
What? I said, when he didn't go on.
Impersonal, he said.
How long did it take you to find that out? I said. (Atwood 1996: 171)

If Offred's and the Commander's social positions are taken into account, those utterances where Offred is even downright rude (“What?”) and ironical (“How long did it take you to find that out?”) when addressing the Commander, are inappropriate on the part of Offred and do not coincide with her position. Here she has abandoned discourse as a string of compromise relations and broken the rules of the inherent censorship of the particular linguistic production. However, they show how Offred plays on the borderline of what she thinks she can do and what not and how their relationship has changed since the first meeting when the rules between them were not yet set and therefore Offred was rather

mEEK and submissive. What has happened in between is a typical example of discursive negation of power.

This piece of conversation shows their transformed relationship. The Commander apologises, trying to save his face. When he does not find suitable words quickly enough, Offred gets impatient and urges him to go on quite impolitely. The last sentence uttered by Offred is especially noteworthy since there Offred is outright sarcastic. There seems to be nothing left in Offred that would remind one of the shy woman who went to the Commander's office for the first time. Little of the formality remains between them. Offred says things to the Commander a little nastily, because she is not afraid of him, for "[i]t's hard to be afraid of a man who is sitting watching you put on hand lotion. This lack of fear is dangerous" (Atwood 1996: 221), since it might lead one to become too careless.

However, much of the Commander's power seems to come from his uniform, because it is actually quite impossible to tell what he really believes in, and when he takes off "his cloth power" (Atwood 1996: 266), he seems smaller and older. It is as if the Commander had two different persons in him. The Commander-side of him in his fancy uniform represents the person who is "at the [very] top" (Atwood 1996: 221), whereas the human-side of him without his uniform among the forbidden things acknowledges his weaknesses and desires and allows Offred to take over the control once in a while. In this respect they are both equal victims of the social order.

Even though Offred knows the Commander is at the very top and finds it hard to believe that she has power over him, she actually does, even though it is "of an equivocal kind" (Atwood 1996: 221). Offred feels she is in control when the Commander is sitting on the floor beside Offred's chair, looking up to her, amused by "this fake subservience" (Atwood 1996: 221). During one of their conversations Offred realises that the Commander probably feels he was responsible for the death of his previous Handmaid,

because it was him, after all, who asked the woman to come into his office and jeopardised her life. Offred also suggests that the Commander wants her life to be bearable to her and the Commander confirms it (Atwood 1996: 197). Offred remarks that “[i]f my life is bearable, maybe what they’re doing is all right after all” (Atwood 1996: 197). With this realisation “[t]hings have changed” (Atwood 1996: 198): now Offred has something on the Commander. “What I have on him is the possibility of my own death. What I have on him is his guilt. At last.” (Atwood 1996: 198). Only after finding the soft spot of the Commander can Offred ask for what she really wants from him. She tells the Commander that she wants to know “[w]hatever there is to know” (Atwood 1996: 198). In Offred’s eyes information is more important than all material things altogether.

Before the black van comes to take Offred away and just after she has met the new Ofglen, Offred realises for the first time that she would do anything just to keep on living.

Dear God, I think, I will do anything you like. Now that you’ve let me off, I’ll obliterate myself, if that’s what you really want; I’ll empty myself, truly, become a chalice. I’ll give up Nick, I’ll forget about the others, I’ll stop complaining. I’ll accept my lot. I’ll sacrifice. I’ll repent. I’ll abdicate. I’ll renounce.

I know this can’t be right but I think it anyway. Everything they taught at the Red Center, everything I’ve resisted, comes flooding in. I don’t want pain. I don’t want to be a dancer, my feet in the air, my head a faceless oblong of white cloth. I don’t want to be a doll hung up on the Wall, I don’t want to be a wingless angel. I want to keep on living, in any form. I resign my body freely, to the uses of others. They can do what they like with me. I am abject.

I feel, for the first time, their true power. (Atwood 1996: 298)

Just like Winston Smith in *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, Offred is also ready to accept everything the social order demands from her, but unlike Winston’s, Offred’s story ends with a more hopeful note. This hope comes into her story a number of times, and could even be seen in the chapter headings in the novel. The only time of the day which is truly Offred’s is the night – “[t]he night is mine, my own time, to do with as I will, as long as I am quiet” (Atwood 1996: 47). There are seven chapters out of the total fifteen called *Night*, implying that she is almost in charge, but the majority of the headings of the chapters and consequently the majority of power is still in the hands of the regime. In addition to those

seven there also exists an eighth, which is called *Nap*. If the word *Night* is connected to sleeping just like *Nap*, then a connection is made and Offred has actually gained the majority of power and left the authorities the remaining minority of seven headings. What is more, in the very last chapter, where Offred is taken away, she seems to be in control. The chapter is entitled *Night*, the time for Offred and it is not the Commander nor the Commander's Wife who is in control, because when Serena Joy asks what Offred has done, one of the men who came with Nick says "[w]e can't say, ma'am" (Atwood 1996: 306) and when the Commander asks to see their authorization, they will not show it to him, but only answer that "'[n]ot that we need one, sir, but all is in order,' [...] 'Violation of state secrets'" (Atwood 1996: 306). Here the safety of the Commander himself is at stake, because he was the one talking about a number of things to Offred and "[p]ossibly *he* will be a security risk, now" (Atwood 1996: 306, emphasis mine). Offred is above him, looking down at him and he is shrinking, because "[t]here have already been purges among them, there will be more" (Atwood 1996: 306). The Commander has lost his power by being too open and careless with Offred and together with him, Serena Joy has lost her power as well, since she depends on her husband. Offred is looking down on the Commander and Serena Joy from the stairs. Then she steps to the black van, which in itself is a movement upwards, not downwards, and the very last word of her story is also a positive one, since she goes "into the darkness within; or else the light" (Atwood 1996: 307).

Serena Joy and the Commander both use Offred and Offred uses them both in return. For example, they both use or would use Offred for showing off. The Commander has the opportunity for this at Jezebel's and the Wife would like to show off her pregnant Handmaid. As if the complicated nature of the relationship of the three would not be enough, Offred cheats them both. She cheats Serena Joy with the Commander and the

Commander with Nick, but she also cheats them simultaneously on another level with Ofglen.

When comparing Offred's and the Commander's relationship with the relationship of Offred and the Wife, one cannot but notice that the relationship with the Commander is more tentative, because the edges of power are more hazy and illusory. The Commander likes to play with Offred in every sense of the word and Offred cannot guess what he is actually thinking. However, Offred leaves the impression that she could guess most of the motives behind Serena Joy's deeds. Nevertheless, Offred's real position in comparison with the Commander and the Wife becomes clearer when Offred manages to break out of the household and hopefully out of the Republic of Gilead as well, whereas the Commander and Serena Joy are both left behind standing in the hallway.

When Bourdieu speaks about how those who have not been given the power of using the official language, are actually collaborating with the authorities as subordination would not be possible without the complicity of those being subordinated, then this is true about the Handmaids only to a certain extent. Offred does consciously collaborate with the Commander and with Serena Joy, but at the same time she is always alert to the tiniest opportunities for taking on more power than has been officially given to her. In her case it is possible because of her power of pregnancy, through which her words acquire more power as well.

The first conclusion that can be drawn from the discussion in the second chapter of the present thesis is that it is particularly through language that the nuances of power relations are expressed in the relationship between Offred and the Commander, and Offred and Commander's Wife. Secondly, the above analysis has shown that the power relationships between Offred and Serena Joy and between Offred and the Commander are far from being fixed and permanent. It does not matter how much power each participant has been

officially accorded by the institution, what matters is how much power they gain from the communication or lose during the communication. Though the amount of power as a whole may remain constant, it is the wit of the speakers as well as very often the linguistic capacity to pronounce certain ideas in a certain way that makes the distribution of power change so that it can vary many times even in the course of a short interaction..

The above nature of power is best exemplified in the relationships between Offred and Serena Joy where Serena Joy is constantly trying to get back her power that keeps flowing into the lap of the fertile handmaid. Because there is a great difference between Serena Joy's official position and her actual silenced and suppressed position in the society, she tries to acquire the official position as the honoured Wife of the top Commander, but she lacks the means for taking it since her power does not come straight from who she is as a person, but rather from who her estranged husband is and this is not enough in comparison with Offred. First Serena Joy just tries to be arrogant and demanding, then she goes on to pretend to be on the same level with Offred, so that it feels as if they were discussing an ordinary date at a kitchen table, but when Offred with her apparently calm ways still manages to seize more power just through her position as a Handmaid, the Wife starts playing foul and using mean ways to show Offred that though she might not be powerful enough to play by the rules, she has enough power to break those rules and get her the picture of Offred's daughter or control electricity.

In the eyes of Offred the Commander has more power than Serena Joy, but Offred feels more free in her interactions with the Commander than with his Wife. However, her requests from the Commander allow him to gain control over Offred and demonstrate his power to the Handmaid. At the same time, there are also other instances, where Offred seizes power as it were through the Commander's sad confessions about his unhappiness

with the social order and the games of Scrabble, which show that Offred can actually be an equal to the Commander through her clever use of language.

Finally, the overall conclusion from the discussion of Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale* is, to borrow from a main argument of Michel Foucault, underlying his *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison* (1979), that power is not something one can hold to oneself, but rather something that constantly changes its owner and becomes sprinkled between the speakers. Foucault's theoretical works about power could be an excellent starting point for a further development of the present thesis.

CONCLUSION

The aim of the present thesis was to demonstrate how the power relationships function in Margaret Atwood's dystopian novel *The Handmaid's Tale*. At first glance, the Handmaids seem not to have any power in the totalitarian Republic of Gilead, but after taking a closer look, the seemingly powerless Handmaids do have some power over the seemingly powerful members of the society, because power relationships are far from being clear and simple in Gilead. In the analysis of the power relationships between the protagonist Offred and the Commander, and between Offred and the Commander's Wife, a special attention was paid to language and how power relationships change during their conversations. The analysis was based on Pierre Bourdieu's theory of language and power in his *Language and Symbolic Power* and on George Orwell's dystopian novel *Nineteen Eighty-Four*. Orwell's novel was chosen as a starting point for the discussion of language and power because, firstly, *Nineteen Eighty-Four* is considered to be one of the best examples of the genre of dystopian fiction, secondly, Atwood herself has admitted Orwell's great influence on her work and, last but not least, because of the significant part language plays in Orwell's totalitarian society of Oceania. Bourdieu's *Language and Symbolic Power* was chosen for the theoretical framework of the thesis because his views, though developed on the basis of democratic societies, can be successfully adapted to an analysis of totalitarian social order, where one of the key elements through which the authorities try to obtain absolute power, is language.

The introduction of the thesis emphasises the novel's connections with Orwell's *Nineteen Eighty-Four*. As Atwood herself has admitted in interviews and essays stored among Atwood Papers at the Thomas Fisher Rare Book Library of the University of Toronto, she was greatly influenced by Orwell's use of language and the forewarning nature of *Nineteen Eighty-Four*. The background materials from Atwood Papers also

demonstrate Atwood's own talent for forewarning as many of the newspaper clippings date from the time after the publication of the novel and deal with such issues as infertility, high pollution rates and theocracies, to name just a few. Though dystopias might be clear cases of fear-laden horror fiction, where power functions mercilessly to its optimal totalitarian limit, their emphasis is not so much on horror for its own sake, but on forewarning, which manifests itself through making clear the connections of the new world order with the old one. Dystopias also make the readers think about the hidden dangers in the society where they live. The main concerns in Atwood's novel are relevant for the readers of today exactly due to the fact that they draw connections between democratic and totalitarian world orders and demonstrate what may happen if certain trends, that may lead to totalitarianism, remain unnoticed in a democratic society. The calling for attention of the readers is also one of the central characteristics of dystopian fiction. Based on four dystopian novels – Aldous Huxley's *Brave New World*, George Orwell's *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, Ray Bradbury's *Fahrenheit Four Fifty-One*, and Margaret Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale* – the other characteristic features listed in the last part of the introduction include special emphasis on language, on power and controlling people, on the connections between past and present, fantasy and reality, and the duality of the whole plot.

The theoretical chapter of the thesis is divided into two parts. The first subchapter concentrates on the ideas of Bourdieu in his *Language and Symbolic Power* that are relevant for the analysis of Atwood's novel. For Bourdieu, language, in addition to being a means of communication, is also something one can use to execute power – to pursue their personal interests and show competence in a specific field of life. The use of language as a means to execute power and as a means through which to gain ultimate power is one of the central themes in *Nineteen Eighty-Four* as well as in *The Handmaid's Tale*. In Bourdieu's opinion language demonstrates institutionalised power, which becomes especially

significant in a totalitarian society which is ruled by different institutions and the strict rules set by those institutions. It has to be emphasised that the institutions in the Republic of Gilead are not only official ones, because the Handmaids also have power that the authorities had not anticipated. The real power of the Handmaids comes from their fertility, which symbolically becomes an institution ruling all other institutions in the society where everything revolves around the fertile women. The power of her body also enters Offred's language, as she feels she can afford to speak up from time to time, both in the presence of the Commander and of the Commander's Wife. However, as the thesis has amply demonstrated, a most significant source of power that comes into Offred's language, can be best analysed in the terms of Bourdieu's understanding of the relationship between language and power.

According to Bourdieu, it depends on the surroundings of the speakers what kind of language they use and what kind of language they can and are supposed to use. In other words, power comes into language from outside and is tightly connected with the social position of the speaker. The social position of the speakers tends to be emphasised by the different uses of their language and therefore the positions of participants in the social surroundings are manifested by the linguistic interactions. By uttering something people demonstrate that they are competent enough for producing utterances appropriate for the particular situation and at the same time express and reproduce the social structure of the conversation. For Bourdieu linguistic utterances are formed in relation to a linguistic market and a linguistic habitus and whenever people use language, even for very personal purposes, they adapt it to the demands of that particular market. The complex relations between the speaker, the language and the social space determine who and to what degree has the right to be listened to, who has the right to interrupt the speaker or who has the

right to ask questions. All these features have also been demonstrated in the analysis of the conversations between Offred and the Commander and Offred and the Commander's Wife.

The authorities of the totalitarian societies think that they can also control thought by controlling language. Bourdieu also refers to the purification of thought through the purification of language. In *The Handmaid's Tale*, where the Handmaids have been turned into inanimate objects, that do not need language, the purification of thought is complete in the sense that as there is virtually no language, there must not be any thought either. In Gilead women have been taken back to the pre-literate beginnings of civilization, where they are subordinated by men.

The second subchapter of the theoretical part of the thesis concentrates on Orwell's use of language as a means for controlling thought and influencing the public. It was argued that though at first glance language is not as prominent in *The Handmaid's Tale* as it is in *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, it does play a significant role, because in the Republic of Gilead the authorities have gone even further than the authorities of Oceania and have not just tried to make language pure of multiple meanings, but forbid the use of language altogether, forcing the Handmaids, and to some extent also the Commander's Wives, into silence. This significant difference, that appeared in the comparison of Orwell's and Atwood's novels, draws attention to the nuances of the use of language in *The Handmaid's Tale*, especially the communication in voice, in whisper and in silence between Offred and the other characters. Also, the importance of language in both novels is demonstrated by the fact that both protagonists decide to fight the social order by using language and telling their story.

In the Republic of Gilead the Handmaids are forced into silence, but Offred refuses to be silent. Offred's conversations with Serena Joy and with the Commander, that were analysed in the second chapter of the thesis, become even more significant, because in addition to Offred breaking the rules by meeting both of them in secret, she also breaks the

rules by just opening her mouth to speak. The same happens when she retells her story – as she realises that language has been considered too dangerous by the authorities to be used, she takes advantage of exactly the same weapon that the authorities fear the most.

The Commander in the novel has a lot of symbolic power in the society, but he loses his power in the eyes of Offred, because the totalitarian regime, as it was established by the Commanders, has not lived up to the majority's expectations and therefore most of the members of the society, including the Commanders themselves, have fallen victims to the political system of the Republic of Gilead, where their domination starts dominating the dominant and there seems to be no easy escape from the situation where abolishing an institution would abolish also the ones who established that institution. Offred sees the Commander to be quite ridiculous at times, with his desire for the past, excitement over going to a brothel or his ignorance about the real conditions the Handmaids live in. All these things make him less powerful in Offred's eyes and make it easier for her to behave in a more relaxed manner in the Commander's presence. The linguistic capital the Commander possesses is a huge one, but he does not show it off, and rather lowers himself to Offred's position, and uses only some of the capital he has been given.

When the relationships between Offred and Serena Joy and Offred and the Commander are compared, it becomes clear that they are of a different nature. When the Commander executes his power in a more hidden manner, Serena Joy is desperate to demonstrate her power over the Handmaid quite openly. Even though her position in the society should refer to her having a lot of power since she is married to the Commander, her real position in the society does not support this idea. In some ways she is even worse off than the fertile Handmaid, because as she is not fertile, she is also not valuable. In the society, where women are valued for their ability to bear children, her power is even more imaginary than

that of Offred and so she desperately tries to compensate her miserable position by trying to execute more power than she actually possesses.

To conclude, in Atwood's dystopian novel *The Handmaid's Tale* Offred's power relationships with Serena Joy and the Commander are best revealed through language, and more specifically, in their dialogues. The detailed analysis of these interactions demonstrated that while the totalitarian regime demands certain official power relationships, the borders of those relationships remain wavering, unclear and indefinite, allowing persons to cross those borders and to change their position in the power hierarchy. While Bourdieu predominantly describes the use of language in institutionalised situations, the situations in Atwood's novel take on a less formal nature and show how the power of speech is exercised or fails to be exercised, in fact, is negotiated, in everyday situations. This renders these power relationships much more flexible than the setting of the totalitarian society in the novel would first allow to think.

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RESÜMEE

Tartu Ülikool, Germaani, romaani ja slaavi filoloogia instituut

Lembi Loigu

The Expression and Realisation of Power Relationships Through Language in Margaret Atwood's Dystopian Novel *The Handmaid's Tale*

Võimusuhte väljendumine ja realiseerumine keele kaudu Margaret Atwoodi antiutoopilises romaanis „Teenijanna lugu“

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Annotatsioon: Margaret Atwoodi antiutoopilise romaani „Teenijanna lugu“ tegevus toimub totalitaarses tulevikühiskonnas, kus esmapilgul peaks välja paistma just see, et ühtedel inimestel on võim, teistel seda aga ei ole. Gileadi Vabariigis peaks selle skeemi kohaselt võimutäius olema koondunud Komandöride kätte, samal ajal kui Teenijannade võimalused ühiskonnas kaasa rääkida peaksid olema äärmiselt piiratud. Lähemal vaatlusel aga selgub, et võimu jagunemine ei ole hoopiski nii must-valge ja sellest lähtuvalt ei ole ka võimusuhted nii selgepiirilised.

Magistriväitekirja kirjutamisel on Margaret Atwoodi romaani „Teenijanna lugu“ analüüsil toetunud George Orwelli antiutoopilisele romaanile „1984“ ja prantsuse sotsioloogi Pierre Bourdieu teosele „Keel ja sümboolne võim,“ kus käsitletakse võimusuhte avaldumist keele kaudu. Töö sissejuhatavas osas antakse ülevaade George Orwelli loomingu mõjust Margaret Atwoodi loominguks, romaani „Teenijanna lugu“ tagapõhjast ja antiutoopia kui žanri põhilistest tunnusjoontest. Väitekirja põhiosa on jaotatud kahte peatükki, millest esimene käsitleb Pierre Bourdieu ideid võimu ja keele suhete kohta ning keskendub keele olulisusele Orwelli romaanis „1984,“ ja tõmbab

parallelele Atwoodi romaaniga. Teises põhipeatükis analüüsitakse romaani „Teenijanna lugu“ peategelase võimusuhteid temast sotsiaalses hierarhias kõrgemal asuvate Komandöri ja Komandöri naisega, näitamaks, et neis suhetes võivad võimu omada erinevad osapooled kordamööda ning see võib ka samal ajahetkel nende vahel jaguneda.

Bourdieu teooria lähtekohaks on väide, et keel ei ole mitte ainult vahend mõtete edastamiseks vaid ka vahend võimu demonstreerimiseks, kusjuures võim tuleb keelde väljastpoolt ja sõltub rääkija positsioonist ühiskonnas. Sellisest käsitlusest tulenevalt on Bourdieu vaateid võimalik kohaldada totalitaarses Gileadi Vabariigis realiseeruvate võimusuhte analüüsimiseks, kus Komandörile on küll institutsiooni poolt antud palju võimu, mille täielikku kasutamist piirab aga institutsioon ise ning kus Komandöride naistel võiks teoreetiliselt olla sama palju võimu kui nende abikaasadel, kuid tegelikkuses on nende võim veelgi imaginaarsem kui Teenijannadel, kelle võim ei pärine mitte ametlikust institutsioonist, vaid pigem nende viljakusest. Peategelaste võim üksteise üle avaldub aga kõige paremini väitekirjas analüüsitud vestlustes, kus see realiseerub keele kaudu.

Kokkuvõtvalt saab öelda, et võimu piirid ja jagunemine inimeste vahel ei ole midagi konstantset vaid on pidevas muutumises. Nii on ka võimusuhted Atwoodi „Teenijanna loos“ palju paindlikumad kui Gileadi Vabariigi totalitaarne ühiskonnakorraldus seda esmapilgul arvata lubab.

Märksõnad: inglise keeles kirjutatud kirjandus, Kanada kirjandus, kirjandusteooria, antiutoopia, võimusuhted, keel ja võim.