

The Word Police

Michiko Kakutani

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—Jeff Cox

This month's inaugural festivities, with their celebration, in Maya Angelou's words, of "humankind"—"the Asian, the Hispanic, the Jew / The African, the Native American, the Sioux, / The Catholic, the Muslim, the French, the Greek / The Irish, the Rabbi, the Priest, the Sheik, / The Gay, the Straight, the Preacher, / The privileged, the homeless, the Teacher"—constituted a kind of official embrace of multiculturalism and a new politics of inclusion.

The mood of political correctness, however, has already made firm inroads into popular culture. Washington boasts a store called Politically Correct that sells pro-whale, anti-meat, ban-the-bomb T-shirts, bumper stickers, and buttons, as well as a local cable television show called *Politically Correct Cooking* that features interviews in the kitchen with representatives from groups like People for the Ethical Treatment of Animals. The Coppertone suntan lotion people are planning to give their longtime cover girl, Little Miss (Ms?) Coppertone, a male equivalent, Little Mr. Coppertone. And even Superman (Superperson?) is rumored to be returning this spring, reincarnated as four ethnically diverse clones: an African-American, an Asian, a Caucasian, and a Latino.

Nowhere is this P.C. mood more striking than in the increasingly noisy debate over language that has moved from university campuses to the country at large—a development that both underscores Americans' puritanical zeal for reform and their unwavering faith in the talismanic power of words.

Certainly no decent person can quarrel with the underlying impulse behind political correctness: a vision of a more just, inclusive society in which racism, sexism, and prejudice of all sorts have been erased. But the methods and fervor of the self-appointed language police can lead to a rigid orthodoxy—and unintentional self-parody—opening the movement to the scorn of conservative opponents and the mockery of cartoonists and late-night television hosts.

5 It's hard to imagine women earning points for political correctness by saying *ovarimony* instead of *testimony*—as one participant at the recent Modern Language

Association convention was overheard to suggest. It's equally hard to imagine people wanting to flaunt their lack of prejudice by giving up such words and phrases as *bull market*, *kaiser roll*, *Lazy Susan*, and *charley horse*.

Several books on bias-free languages have already appeared, and the 1991 edition of the Random House *Webster's College Dictionary* boasts an appendix titled "Avoiding Sexist Language." The dictionary also includes such linguistic mutations as *womyn* (women, "used as an alternative to avoid the suggestion of sexism perceived in the sequence m-e-n") and *waitron* (a gender-blind term for waiter or waitress).

Many of these dictionaries and guides not only warn the reader against offensive racial and sexual slurs, but also try to establish and enforce a whole new set of usage rules. Take, for instance, *The Bias-Free Word Finder, a Dictionary of Nondiscriminatory Language* by Rosalie Maggio (Beacon Press)—a volume often indistinguishable, in its meticulous solemnity, from the tongue-in-cheek *Official Politically Correct Dictionary and Handbook* put out last year by Henry Beard and Christopher Cerf (Villard Books). Ms. Maggio's book supplies the reader intent on using kinder, gentler language with writing guidelines as well as a detailed listing of more than five thousand "biased words and phrases."

Whom are these guidelines for? Somehow one has a tough time picturing them replacing *Fowler's Modern English Usage* in the classroom, or being adopted by the average man (sorry, individual) in the street.

The "pseudogeneric *he*," we learn from Ms. Maggio, is to be avoided like the plague, as is the use of the word *man* to refer to humanity. *Fellow*, *king*, *lord*, and *master* are bad because they're "male-oriented words," and *king*, *lord*, and *master* are especially bad because they're also "hierarchical, dominator society terms." The politically correct lion becomes the "monarch of the jungle," new-age children play "someone on the top of the heap," and the *Mona Lisa* goes down in history as Leonardo's "acme of perfection."

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As for the word *black*, Ms. Maggio says it should be excised from terms with a negative spin: She recommends substituting words like *mouse* for *black eye*, *ostracize* for *blackball*, *payola* for *blackmail*, and *outcast* for *black sheep*. Clearly, some of these substitutions work better than others: Somehow the "sinister humor" of Kurt Vonnegut or *Saturday Night Live* doesn't quite make it; nor does the "denouncing" of the Hollywood 10.

For the dedicated user of politically correct language, all these rules can make for some messy moral dilemmas. Whereas *battered wife* is a gender-biased term, the gender-free term *battered spouse*, Ms. Maggio notes, incorrectly implies "that men and women are equally battered."

On one hand, say Francine Wattman Frank and Paula A. Treichler in their book *Language, Gender, and Professional Writing* (Modern Language Association), *he or she* is an appropriate construction for talking about an individual (like a jockey, say) who belongs to a profession that's predominantly male—it's a way of emphasizing "that such occupations are not barred to women or that women's concerns need to be kept in mind." On the other hand, they add, using masculine pronouns rhetorically can underscore ongoing male dominance in those fields, implying the need for change.

And what about the speech codes adopted by some universities in recent years? Although they were designed to prohibit students from uttering sexist and racist

slurs, they would extend, by logic, to blacks who want to use the word *nigger* to strip the term of its racist connotations, or homosexuals who want to use the word *queer* to reclaim it from bigots.

In her book, Ms. Maggio recommends applying bias-free usage retroactively: She suggests paraphrasing politically incorrect quotations, or replacing “the sexist words or phrases with ellipsis dots and/or bracketed substitutes,” or using *sic* “to show that the sexist words come from the original quotation and to call attention to the fact that they are incorrect.”

15 Which leads the skeptical reader of *The Bias-Free Word Finder* to wonder whether *All the King's Men* should be retitled *All the Ruler's People*; *Pet Semetary*, *Animal Companion Graves*; *Birdman of Alcatraz*, *Birdperson of Alcatraz*; and *The Iceman Cometh*, *The Ice Route Driver Cometh*?

Will making such changes remove the prejudice in people's minds? Should we really spend the time trying to come up with non-male-based alternatives to *Midas touch*, *Achilles' heel*, and *Montezuma's revenge*? Will tossing out Santa Claus—whom Ms. Maggio accuses of reinforcing “the cultural male-as-norm system”—in favor of Belfana, his Italian female alter ego, truly help banish sexism? Can the avoidance of “violent expressions and metaphors” like *kill two birds with one stone*, *sock it to 'em*, or *kick an idea around* actually promote a more harmonious world?

The point isn't that the excesses of the word police are comical. The point is that their intolerance (in the name of tolerance) has disturbing implications. In the first place, getting upset by phrases like *bullish on America* or *the City of Brotherly Love* tends to distract attention from the real problems of prejudice and injustice that exist in society at large, turning them into mere questions of semantics. Indeed, the emphasis currently put on politically correct usage has uncanny parallels with the academic movement of deconstruction—a method of textual analysis that focuses on language and linguistic pyrotechnics—which has become firmly established on university campuses.

In both cases, attention is focused on surfaces, on words and metaphors; in both cases, signs and symbols are accorded more importance than content. Hence, the attempt by some radical advocates to remove *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* from curriculums on the grounds that Twain's use of the word *nigger* makes the book a racist text—never mind the fact that this American classic (written in 1884) depicts the spiritual kinship achieved between a white boy and a runaway slave, never mind the fact that the “nigger” Jim emerges as the novel's most honorable, decent character.

Ironically enough, the P.C. movement's obsession with language is accompanied by a strange Orwellian willingness to warp the meaning of words by placing them under a high-powered ideological lens. For instance, the *Dictionary of Cautionary Words and Phrases*—a pamphlet issued by the University of Missouri's Multicultural Management Program to help turn “today's journalists into tomorrow's multicultural newsroom managers”—warns that using the word *articulate* to describe members of a minority group can suggest the opposite, “that ‘those people’ are not considered well educated, articulate and the like.”

20 The pamphlet patronizes minority groups, by cautioning the reader against using the words *lazy* and *burly* to describe any member of such groups; and it issues a similar warning against using words like *gorgeous* and *petite* to describe women.

As euphemism proliferates with the rise of political correctness, there is a spread of the sort of sloppy, abstract language that Orwell said is “designed to make lies sound truthful and murder respectable, and to give an appearance of solidity to pure wind.” *Fat* becomes *big boned* or *differently sized*; *stupid* becomes *exceptional*; *stoned* becomes *chemically inconvenienced*.

Wait a minute here! Aren't such phrases eerily reminiscent of the euphemisms coined by the government during Vietnam and Watergate? Remember how the military used to speak of “pacification,” or how President Richard M. Nixon's press secretary, Ronald L. Ziegler, tried to get away with calling a lie an “inoperative statement”?

Calling the homeless “the underhoused” doesn't give them a place to live; calling the poor “the economically marginalized” doesn't help them pay the bills. Rather, by playing down their plight, such language might even make it easier to shrug off the seriousness of their situation.

Instead of allowing free discussion and debate to occur, many gung-ho advocates of politically correct language seem to think that simple suppression of a word or concept will magically make the problem disappear. In the *Bias-Free Word Finder*, Ms. Maggio entreats the reader not to perpetuate the negative stereotype of Eve. “Be extremely cautious in referring to the biblical Eve,” she writes; “this story has profoundly contributed to negative attitudes toward women throughout history, largely because of misogynistic and patriarchal interpretations that labeled her evil, inferior, and seductive.”

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The story of Bluebeard, the rake (whoops!—the libertine) who killed his seven wives, she says, is also to be avoided, as is the biblical story of Jezebel. Of Jesus Christ, Ms. Maggio writes: “There have been few individuals in history as completely androgynous as Christ, and it does his message a disservice to overinsist on his maleness.” She doesn't give the reader any hints on how this might be accomplished; presumably, one is supposed to avoid describing him as the Son of God.

Of course, the P.C. police aren't the only ones who want to proscribe what people should say or give them guidelines for how they may use an idea; Jesse Helms and his supporters are up to exactly the same thing when they propose to patrol the boundaries of the permissible in art. In each case, the would-be censor aspires to suppress what he or she finds distasteful—all, of course, in the name of the public good.

In the case of the politically correct, the prohibition of certain words, phrases, and ideas is advanced in the cause of building a brave new world free of racism and hate, but this vision of harmony clashes with the very ideals of diversity and inclusion that the multicultural movement holds dear, and it's purchased at the cost of freedom of speech.

In fact, the utopian world envisioned by the language police would be bought at the expense of the ideals of individualism and democracy articulated in the “Gettysburg Address”: “Four score and seven years ago our fathers brought forth on this continent a new nation, conceived in liberty and dedicated to the proposition that all men are created equal.”

Of course, the P.C. police have already found Lincoln's words hopelessly “phallogocentric.” No doubt they would rewrite the passage: “Four score and seven years ago our foremothers and forefathers brought forth on this continent a new nation, formulated with liberty, and dedicated to the proposition that all humankind is created equal.”