



QES

The Queen's English Society

POLITICAL CORRECTNESS A highly contagious social disease

Political correctness is the practice of not calling something by its name because certain people consider that name in some way offensive. If you think about it, this is nonsense. Moreover, it is only recently that political correctness has become a serious social disease. In the past, there were certain things that were not directly mentioned because they were considered “unpleasant” such as the words “lavatory” which became “toilet”, “WC” or even “powder room” or “died” which became “passed away”. Within certain limits, such niceties are acceptable to soften conversation in polite society. But this does not constitute political correctness.

Political correctness occurs when people become embarrassed to call something what it is because they – the users of these strange “politically correct” terms – are embarrassed by or feel uneasy about the subject of their conversation. The problem is not one of language but one of psychology. Most people have complexes or hang-ups of one sort or another. In this case, these complexes cause certain people to feel in some way offended by a word because it touches a sensitive spot in their own subconscious. So they avoid the word that makes them feel uncomfortable and find some way – any way – of avoiding it. Typical of this is the hang-up that many women have about having been exploited for centuries. Certainly they were but today, in the civilised western world that is no longer the case. But they still have a chip on their shoulder and feel that certain words used in their correct sense in the 21st century assume the meaning they had in the 19th century and imply that they are being reduce to the status forced on them at that time. This is, of course, utter nonsense. The implication is in the mind of the psychologically troubled person, not in the word used. We provide a list of some of these ridiculous terms at the end of this article but here, by way of example, are a couple. If someone is Jewish, he is a Jew. It is thus perfectly legitimate to call him a Jew. He will not be insulted, for that is what he is. The same goes for a Black. His skin is dark, he identifies with a certain ethnic group, is proud to belong to that group and so has no grounds to be insulted by the word (although it is true that he is not black but is rather some shade of brown just as the white person is not white but rather a sort of blotchy pink colour). The fear of “incorrectness” here lies not in the mind of our Jewish or Black friend but rather in that of the white Christian who is referring to them. This shows that the white Christian in question has some psychological reservation or hang-up when it comes to Jews or Blacks. Political correctness is therefore a verbal ploy to cover up latent social prejudices in the users of such terms.

It is a fact that most politically correct terms in English originate in the USA, a country with a very varied ethnic mix, a strange blend of religious fanaticism, vast swathes of complex-ridden, self-conscious, deeply inhibited people, an innate aggressiveness and an over-developed, hyper-sensitive and misplaced sense of personal dignity. Any direct word, any uninvited physical contact (such as touching a person’s arm during a conversation) is considered an invasion of the person’s private space. In this sort of atmosphere, it is essential at all cost not to refer to a person using a word that accurately describes him as that is too uncomfortably personal and breaches that sacrosanct personal space.

This phenomenon saps the English language of much of its meaning, the substitute terms are frequently inaccurate and not only avoid the taboo word but also substitute the original sense. It is also most unfortunate that this corruption of English is infectious and similarly affects other languages which borrow the new terms, displacing perfectly good words of their own. This is not just a social disease, **it is a highly contagious social disease.**

But now let us take some specific examples, demonstrating – where appropriate – why and how the politically correct terms are not simply ridiculous but also incorrect.

EXAMPLES OF “POLITICALLY CORRECT” WORDS AND EXPRESSIONS IN ENGLISH

African American – Originally the word used to refer to people of African origin was “negro”. This was subsequently replaced by “Black”. This can be justified on the grounds that “negro” is the normal Spanish word for “black”. It was therefore reasonable to replace the Spanish word by its English equivalent. As pointed out above, the term “black” is not to be taken literally as the skin colour in question is brown, but the word is used in opposition to “white” which is used for people with light or pinkish skin. But suddenly, “Black” became offensive in the USA and they started to refer to people with dark skin as African Americans. But these people have had nothing to do with Africa for a couple of centuries or more. They are not Africans any more than Americans descended from Europeans are European Americans. Conversely, if a Black US citizen is an African American, what is a Black UK citizen? A British African American? Or is a French Black a French African American? Madness! Black people are not ashamed of being Black – why should they be? It is the bigoted white American who has trouble with the word “Black”. Let us give Black people the respect they deserve and recognise them as such without any reservations.

Gender-neutrality – (See the separate article on the misuse of the word gender under the “Common Errors of English Usage” on the main “Comedy of Errors” page.)

However, we can here consider the horrors of so-called “gender-neutrality” This is an attempt to remove any indication of the sex of a person from any term used, e.g. actress/actor, manageress/manager. If some (mainly women) feel it offensive to qualify a woman (and hence also a man) by a word that reveals their biological identity, then so be it. Let them live with their complexes provided that they do not distort the language. But how do we get around the essential distinctions made by husband/wife (OK, spouse would do but we often need to specify which spouse is at issue), bride/groom, mother/father (parent? OK but which one?), brother/sister (sibling? OK but which one?) and so forth. The distinction is essential or else how would it be possible to perform a marriage or hear divorce proceedings? Then there are terms involving “man”. Well that can be solved by using “woman” as in chairwoman or sportswoman. Then, taking this a step further, the fanatics object to the use of the word “man” in the sense of “human being” as in manhole, man-made, manpower or manslaughter. They would have them replaced by personhole, person-made, personpower or personslaughter – Weird? Ridiculous? Yes, but possible.

The proof of the utter folly of this form of political correctness is apparent when we move from nouns to pronouns. How can we possibly use the language without the distinction between he/she, him/her, his/hers? Impossible! Indeed it is impossible to achieve total “gender-neutrality” and so why bother to “patch” the language in order to try to paint out a few perfectly legitimate and respectable terms that refer to the – dare we say it? – to the fair sex?

Here we are concerned only with English but it is worth mentioning in passing that, in French, all nouns animate and inanimate are either masculine or feminine (the table is feminine, the drawer is masculine) and in German there is masculine, feminine and neuter and the “sex” or nature of a noun does not necessarily correspond to its gender (the famous “girl” who is neuter, the “cabbage” that is feminine and the “day” that is masculine). So if “gender-neutrality” is an impossibility in other languages, why should it be considered possible or necessary in English alone?

(See the article in the Rogues’ Gallery on gender-neutrality in the European Union.)

Vertically challenged – This is the new term for what used to be called a “dwarf” or a “midget”. These words mean abnormally undersized or very small. What is wrong with that for a person with such physical characteristics? It is no insult to use such terms in reference to a person meeting those definitions. Conversely, “vertically challenged” is nonsense and inaccurate. Nonsense because the person is not being challenged. No-one is challenging the person to be taller; the midget cannot, by taking up the challenge, grow any taller. And inaccurate because a person 2.5 metres tall is also vertically challenged. He will have trouble finding a chair or table to suit him, fitting into a car, occupying a seat in a plane and passing through doors without banging his head. He could be called a “giant”. Is the word “giant” also politically incorrect and, if so, is “vertically challenged” not the politically correct term for him also? Hence, if “vertically challenged” means “midget” or “dwarf” it must also include the opposite, the “giant”. It is a meaningless and vague expression that should be banned.

Physically challenged – Here is that word “challenged” again. Whom are we challenging this time? The person who, by birth or accident, is in some way not physically “standard”. A brave soldier who fought to defend his country and had a limb blown off used to be considered to have been “crippled”; he was a cripple (*A person (permanently) impaired or deficient in some other way, specified or understood.* OED). That was certainly very sad and the person was deserving of special consideration but it was perfectly acceptable and not considered offensive to call him what he was – a cripple. At some point, somebody decided “crippled” was degrading and so this was replaced by “handicapped” which was still reasonable in that it meant that the person was at some disadvantage in performing certain tasks, (*a condition that markedly restricts a person’s ability to function physically, mentally, or socially.* OED) e.g. walking. Then this, too, as a new penny, started to tarnish and was eventually deemed offensive and so “disabled” came to be used. And now, even “disabled” is considered degrading and, having run out of synonyms in the English language, some lunatic came up with the meaningless term “differently abled” (no, a person who speaks 10 languages or who is a brilliant surgeon is “differently abled” from the common of mortals) and then there is “physically challenged” and these are now the politically correct terms. But an ordinary person who is asked to carry a 1000 kg load on his back is physically challenged. It has nothing to do with lacking a limb!

The list is endless!