

Republican Perspective

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Bias-Free Language

When my son was at Cal in the 1980s, there was a student in his living group who was in a wheelchair. I made the mistake of referring to him as “crippled.” My son told me that I should not say that. It was deemed offensive, and I should use the term “handicapped.” I had meant no offense, but corrected my archaic and apparently insensitive language so as not to embarrass anyone. Little did I, or my son, or, for that matter, the wheelchair-bound student know that “handicapped” itself would soon be deemed offensive. It would be replaced by “disabled,” and then by “differently-abled,” and then by “physically-challenged,” and then by “person who is wheelchair mobile.” Are you following this?

Somewhere in that same period of my son’s college years, I used the term “Oriental.” Oooops. I should say “Asian” instead. Never mind that since my childhood “Oriental” had been the accepted term---as a noun or as an adjective---denoting those of Oriental (or Asian if you prefer) descent or those living in the Orient (Asia if you prefer). Are Oriental rugs and Oriental artwork now Asian instead? How about Oriental foods? There’s an Oriental Food Market on Clayton Road and a Diablo Oriental Foods on North Main; perhaps the proprietors never got the memo.

A harbinger of the politically correct frenzy came in the 1960s, when “Negro” (which had earlier replaced “colored”) became offensive and was replaced by “Black”---which itself would have been offensive a decade earlier. But in 1991 when Justice Thurgood Marshall held a press conference on the occasion of his retirement, he corrected a questioner who used the word “Black.” He was not Black, he said, but “Afro-American.” But even Mr. Justice Marshall himself would soon be corrected, as his preferred “Afro-American” was to be replaced by “African American.” Still with me?

These evolutions of terminology were in response to the ever-changing demands of the morally superior who successfully find offense everywhere in the words of those innocents stumbling through the language minefield. So two questions: who are these politically correct language czars, and when will we commoners finally speak acceptably? The University of New Hampshire’s *Bias-Free Language Guide* offers some clues.

In addition to “person who is wheelchair mobile,” here are a just a few examples from the *Guide*: Don’t say “obese” or “overweight”---instead say “persons of size.” Don’t say “Caucasian”---instead say “European-American individuals.” Don’t say “homosexual”---instead say “same gender loving.” Don’t say “illegal

alien"---"undocumented immigrant" is acceptable, but "person seeking asylum" or "refugee" are better. Don't say "foreigner"---instead say "international person." Don't say "rich"---instead say "person of material wealth." Don't say "poor"---instead (and here you have two choices) say "person who lacks advantages that others have" or "low economic status related to a person's education, occupation, and income." And my personal favorite: don't say "healthy"---instead say "non-disabled." Really?

The *Guide* discourages also: "Arab," "elders," "senior citizens," "speech impediment," "sexual preference," "normal," "manpower," "chairman," and so on. You get the idea.

But it came to light that the *Guide* disapproved of the word "American" when referring to you and me, since technically all New World people are American, from Point Barrow to Tierra Del Fuego. So saying "American" when referring to thee and me would be insufficiently inclusive. The recommended substitutes are "U.S. citizen" or "U.S. resident."

Well, when it became known outside the ivory tower and ivied walls of UNH that the word "American" was discouraged, the *Bias-Free Language Guide* came under scrutiny in the media. Alumni and donors were not pleased with the *Guide*.

UNH president Mark Huddleston responded by saying he was troubled by its content. The *Guide* had been put together, he said, "by a small group of faculty, students, and staff," none of whom have stepped forward to claim responsibility. Although the *Guide* had been available on the official website of UNH, Huddleston had it removed on July 30, 2015. Huddleston said that "UNH policy on speech is that it is free and unfettered on our campuses." He called the *Guide* offensive and he went on to say that "speech guides or codes have no place at any American university." Bravo!

Carrying speech-control to a whole new level, two professors at Washington State University recently tried to enforce politically correct classroom speech by penalizing the grades of students who strayed. To his credit, WSU interim president Daniel J. Bernardo publicly put a stop to it. But the incident is troubling because it shows that at least some professors believe enforcing politically correct speech is a legitimate method of coercing politically correct learning and thinking.

So the first question I posed was: who are these politically correct language czars? The UNH *Bias-Free Language Guide* and the WSU classroom experience offer a likely answer: academics who are self-appointed to control the way we think by controlling the way we speak.

Now as to the second question: when will we common folk finally speak

acceptably? Well, let's consider the history of this phenomenon. The number of terms deemed offensive is constantly expanding and, in the process, including ever more seemingly innocuous words. At the same time, the replacement of an offensive term with an acceptable term is never final. What was an acceptable fix yesterday will be offensive tomorrow, so the finger-wagging correction process can continue indefinitely.

When will our speech finally be acceptable? Apparently never.