The Game of the Name

By Steven Pinker


Dying such politically correct sensibilities, The Economist allows the use of variants of "he" for both sexes (as in "everyone should watch his language"), and "crippled" for disabled people.

One side says that language insidiously shapes attitudes and that vigilance against subtle offense is necessary to eliminate prejudice. The other bristles at legislating language, seeing a corrosion of clarity and expressive- ness at best, and thought control at worst, changing the way reporters render events and opinions.

Both arguments make assumptions about language and its relation to thoughts and attitudes — a connection first made in 1946 by George Orwell in his essay "Politics and the English Language," which suggested that euphemisms, cliches and vague writing could be used to reduce orthodoxy and to obscure the way we understand language and thought better than we did in Orwell's time, and our current insights about the P.C. controversy.

First, words are not thoughts. Despite the appeal of the theory that language determines thought, no cognitive scientist believes it. People coin new words, grapple for le mot juste, translate from other languages and ridicule or define P.C. terms. None of this would be possible if the ideas expressed by words were identical to the words themselves. This should alleviate anxiety on both sides, reminding us that we are talking about style manuals, not brain programming.

Second, words are arbitrary. The word "duck" does not look, walk or quack like a duck, but we all know it means duck because we have memorized an arbitrary association between a sound and a meaning.

Some words can be built out of smaller pieces and their meanings can be discerned by examining how the pieces are tranformed (dish washer washes dishes), but even complex words turn opaque, and people become oblivious to the logic of their derivation, memorizing them as arbitrary symbols. (Who last thought of "breakfast" as "breaking a fast"?)

The Los Angeles Times's style manual seems to assume that readers are reflexive etymologists, for it bans "invalid" (reality not "valid") and thus an offensive reference to a disabled person.

"New World" (ignores indigenous cultures while "discovering" Columbus's voyage) and "Dutch treat" (offensive, presumably, to Netherlanders). But I doubt if Americans can guess the dozen-odd idioms in which Dutch means "eaters" ("Dutch uncle," "Dutch oven") with which the word probably has sunken off into the stylishness from the 19th century since the English coined such terms to tweak their naval rivals.

The bewildering feature of political correctness is the mandated replacement of formerly unacceptable terms by politically correct terms. "slave" becomes "slaves" by "black" by "African-American"; "Spanish-American" by "Hispanic" by "Latino" by "Hispanic" by "inner city" by, according to The Los Angeles Times, "slum" again.

Now should a thoughtful person react to this carousel? Respect means treating people as they wish to be treated, beginning with names. That is why there is a clear need for valid and good-sounding names. Many deaf people insist on being called "deaf," not "individuals with hearing loss," and as one was taught to refer to the Washington Mall, I was surprised to learn that the

P.C. aerobics on the euphemism treadmill.

Steven Pinker, professor of brain and cognitive sciences at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, is author of "The Language Instinct." and the name becomes colored by the concept; the concept does not become freshened by the name (We will know we have achieved equality an mutual respect when names for ministries stay put.)

People learn a word by association, other people using it, so when the use a word, they provide a history of their reading and listening. Using this term, the P.C. controversy shows not sensitivity but subservience, to the right magazines or going to the right conferences.

Shifting in terms is an unfortunate side effect. Many people who don't have a top of racism or prejudice but happen to be older or distant from university, media and government spheres find themselves tamed a bit by the unwillingness to use or to embrace terms like "Oriental" or "crippled." Arbiter of the changing language. Anyone who must ask themselves whether this stigmatization is really what they do at work should accomplish...

Ships in the Night

By Lawrence Bush

I

ACCORD, N.Y. — I had only just arrived at the club when I bumped into Roger. After we had exchanged a few pleasantries, he lowered his voice and asked, "What do you think of Martha and I as a potential threesome?"

"That," I replied, "would be a mistake. Martha and me is more like it.

"You're interested in Martha?"

"I'm interested in clear communication."

"Fair enough," he agreed. "May the best man win." Then he added, "Here I thought we had a clear path to becoming a very unique couple."

"You couldn't be a very unique couple, Roger."

"And why is that?"

"Martha couldn't be a little preg- nant, could she?"

"Say what? You think that Martha and me..."

"Martha and I."

"Oh," Roger blushed and set down his drink. "Gee, I didn't know."

"Of course you didn't," I assured him. "Most people don't feel very badly about this."

"You shouldn't say that. I feel bad..."

"Please, don't," Roger said. "If anyone's affected here, it's me."

Lawrence Bush is an editor and fiction writer.