

# The Game of the Name

By Steven Pinker

**T**he Los Angeles Times's new "Guidelines on Racial and Ethnic Identification," for its writers and editors, bans or restricts some 150 words and phrases such as "birth defect," "Chinese fire drill," "crazy," "dark continent," "step-child," "WASP" and "to welsh."

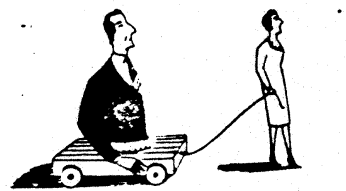
Defying such politically correct sensibilities, *The Economist* allows the use of variants of "he" for both sexes (as in "everyone should watch his language"), and "crippled" for disabled people.

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 expressiveness at best, and thought control at worst, changing the way reporters render events and opinions.

Both arguments make assumptions about language and how it relates 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, clichés and vague writing could be used to reinforce orthodoxy and defend the indefensible. We understand language and thought better than we did in Orwell's time, and our discoveries offer insights about the P.C. controversy.

First, words are not thoughts. Despite the appeal of the theory that

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- A PERFECT COUPLE -

language determines thought, no cognitive scientist believes it. People coin new words, grapple for le mot juste, translate from other languages and ridicule or defend 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 arranged (a dishwasher 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 style manual seems to assume that readers are reflexive etymologists, for it bans "invalid" (literally "not valid" and thus an offensive reference to a disabled person), "New World" (ignores the indigenous cultures that preceded Columbus's voyage) and "Dutch treat" (offensive, presumably, to Netherlanders). But I doubt if Americans associate the dozen-odd idioms in which Dutch means "ersatz" ("Dutch uncle," "Dutch oven") with the Dutch; presumably, the sting has worn off in the three centuries since the English coined such terms to tweak their naval rivals.

The bewildering feature of political correctness is the mandated replacement of formerly unexceptionable terms by new ones: "Negro" by "black" by "African-American"; "Spanish-American" by "Hispanic"; by "Latino"; "slum" by "ghetto" by "inner city" by, according to *The Los Angeles Times*, "slum" again.

How 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 guidelines. One wonders, though, why *The Los Angeles Times's* style panel apparently did not consult those it defends. Many deaf people insist on being called "deaf," not "individuals who cannot hear," and as one who was taught to reverse the Walling Wall, I was surprised to learn that the



- "THIS IS A BLACK BIRD" -

## P.C. aerobics on the euphemism treadmill.

term is "highly offensive" rather than merely obsolete.

But if users of new ethnic terms have responsibilities, so do those who promulgate the terms. What are their motives? What are the effects?

Occasionally, neologisms are defended with some semantic rationale: "black" emphasized parity with the corresponding "white." "Native American" reminds us of who was here first and eschews the inaccurate European label "Indian." But when new terms replace ones that had been justified in their own day with equal moral force and when offensive and sanctioned terms are near-synonyms — "colored people," "people of color"; "Afro-American," "African-American"; Negro (Spanish for "black"), "black" — something else must be driving the process.

To a linguist, the phenomenon is familiar: the euphemism treadmill. People invent new "polite" words to refer to emotionally laden or distasteful things, but the euphemism becomes tainted by association and the new one that must be found acquires its own negative connotations.

"Water closet" becomes "toilet" (originally a term for any body care, as in "toilet kit"), which becomes "bathroom," which becomes "rest room," which becomes "lavatory." "Garbage collection" turns into "sanitation," which turns into "environmental services."

The euphemism treadmill shows that concepts, not words, are in charge: give a concept a new name,

and the name becomes colored by the concept; the concept does not become freshened by the name. (We will know we have achieved equality and mutual respect when names for minorities stay put.)

People learn a word by witnessing other people using it, so when they use a word, they provide a history of their reading and listening. Using the latest term for a minority often shows not sensitivity but subscription to the right magazines or going to the right cocktail parties.

Shifts in terms have an unfortunate side effect. Many people who don't have a drop of malice or prejudice but happen to be older or distant from university, media and government spheres find themselves tainted a bit for innocently using passé terms like "Oriental" or "crippled." Arbiters of the changing linguistic fashions must ask themselves whether this stigmatization is really what they set out to accomplish. [

# Ships in the Night

By Lawrence Bush

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 twosome?"

"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 sighed. "Here I thought we had a clear path to becoming a very unique couple."

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

"Oh? And why is that?"

"Martha couldn't be a little pregnant, 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."

"I feel very badly about this."

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

"Please, don't," Roger said. "If anyone's at fault here, it's me!" □

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