

# SUBSCRIBE NOW AND RECEIVE A FREE BOOK!



“*The Independent Review* does not accept pronouncements of government officials nor the conventional wisdom at face value.”

—**JOHN R. MACARTHUR**, Publisher, *Harper’s*

“*The Independent Review* is excellent.”

—**GARY BECKER**, Noble Laureate in Economic Sciences

Subscribe to [The Independent Review](#) and receive a free book of your choice such as the 25th Anniversary Edition of ***Crisis and Leviathan: Critical Episodes in the Growth of American Government***, by founding editor Robert Higgs.

Thought-provoking and educational, [The Independent Review](#) is blazing the way toward informed debate. This quarterly journal offers leading-edge insights on today’s most critical issues in economics, healthcare, education, the environment, energy, defense, law, history, political science, philosophy, and sociology.

Student? Educator? Journalist? Business or civic leader? Engaged citizen? This journal is for YOU!



Order today for more **FREE** book options

**SUBSCRIBE**

Perfect for anyone on the go! *The Independent Review* is now available on mobile devices or tablets on the Apple App Store, Google Play, or Magzter. [Learn More.](#)



#### Editor

Robert M. Whaples

#### Co-Editors

Christopher J. Coyne  
Michael C. Munger  
Gregory J. Robson  
Diana W. Thomas

# A Critique of Politically Correct Language

— ◆ —

BEN O'NEILL

**D**efenders of politically correct language claim that it is a civilizing influence on society, that it discourages the use of words that have negative or offensive connotations and thereby grants respect to people who are the victims of unfair stereotypes. In this view, the purpose and effect of politically correct language are to prevent bullying and offensive behavior and to replace terms loaded with offensive undertones with allegedly impartial words. So, for example, people are discouraged from referring to someone with a mental disability as “mentally retarded” and instead encouraged to refer to him as being “differently abled” or as “having special needs.” Similarly, one can no longer refer to “garbagemen” or even the gender-neutral “garbage collectors”—no, they are “environmental service workers,” thank you very much!

Though opposed to the term *political correctness*, journalist Polly Toynbee explains the drive for this kind of language: “The phrase ‘political correctness’ was born as a coded cover for all who still want to say Paki, spastic or queer, all those who still want to pick on anyone not like them, playground bullies who never grew up. The politically correct society is the civilised society, however much some may squirm at the more inelegant official circumlocutions designed to avoid offence. Inelegance is better than bile” (2009).

Her fellow journalist Will Hutton offers a similar defense, saying that “it matters profoundly what we say. It is an advance that it is no longer possible to call blacks

---

**Ben O'Neill** is a lecturer in statistics at the School of Physical, Environmental, and Mathematical Sciences, University of New South Wales, Australian Defence Force Academy, Canberra.

*The Independent Review*, v. 16, n. 2, Fall 2011, ISSN 1086-1653, Copyright © 2011, pp. 279-291.

niggers and that sexist banter in the workplace is understood to be oppressive and abusive. It is right that the groups in society that used to be written off as mentally retarded are recognised as having special needs” (2001).

Though disparaging the use of words such as *retarded* and *queer* as a matter of civility and seeking to replace them with others, defenders of politically correct language allege that the very notion of political correctness is a myth—an invention of the critics of the so-called “progressive” program, designed to discredit the critics’ opponents without proper argument. According to Hutton, “Political correctness is one of the brilliant tools that the American Right developed in the mid-1980s as part of its demolition of American liberalism” (2001).<sup>1</sup> Toynbee goes further, saying, “Anyone on the left boasting of not being politically correct deserves a good kicking: the phrase is an empty rightwing smear designed only to elevate its user” (2009).

For the advocates of politically correct language, replacement of existing terminology with politically correct terms has two purported virtues:

1. It reduces the social acceptability of using offensive terms.
2. It discourages the reflexive use of words that import a negative stereotype, thereby promoting conscious thinking about how to describe others fairly on their merits.

To test whether these alleged virtues hold, it is necessary to examine the process of semantic change, the reason that terms become offensive or inoffensive, and the effects of politically correct language on discourse.

## Semantic Change and the Alleged Purpose of Politically Correct Language

To understand the drive for politically correct language, it is important to understand the problem that this language is allegedly intended to solve. To understand this problem, we need to examine the etymology of words (that is, the history of words and how their meaning changes over time). *Why* is *mentally retarded* a bad term? *When* and *how* is it offensive? Is it an inherently offensive term, or does something in the way that it is delivered make it so? Was it always this way, or was it once politically correct?

The word’s lexicology does not indicate a hostile meaning. To “retard” something means to hinder or impede it, to make it slower or diminish its development or

---

1. Note that the term *American liberalism*, used here by Hutton, refers to support for the coercive system of welfare statism—that is, for a form of *nonliberalism*. This usage represents an evolution in meaning from accurate to inaccurate description.

progress in some way.<sup>2</sup> Thus, to describe someone as “mentally retarded” literally means that their mental processes are somehow impeded, hindered, diminished, or slowed down. This meaning is certainly accurate, and it is a neutral description because the term itself does not imply a value judgment about such diminished mental functioning.

Perhaps, though, this fact has a certain implicit negative connotation in its very recognition. After all, it is true that a properly functioning brain is preferable to a brain that is functioning in an impaired or diminished manner. Hence, to recognize that someone is “mentally retarded” is immediately to make the logical jump to the value judgment that this condition is a *bad* thing—that the person would be better off if he were not mentally retarded, and isn’t it a shame that he is. This possibility, however, is not enough to warrant the claim that the term is offensive—that is, unless having true facts brought to our attention is itself offensive.

So where does the alleged rudeness of the term *retarded* originally come from? If not from the term’s literal meaning, it must come from its delivery: the tone and context in which it is delivered. If people use the term *mentally retarded* as an insult to refer to others with scorn through a spiteful tone of voice or in an insulting context, the term will certainly be offensive. It is offensive in these cases precisely because *it is intended to be* and because its delivery reveals this intention. Thus, when a playground bully says to someone he doesn’t like: “Ha, ha, you’re stupid—you’re *retarded!*” the term *retarded* takes on an offensive meaning because this meaning is what the bully intends. His tone of voice and general attitude toward his target make clear that he is not soberly trying to diagnose the latter’s cognitive functioning with a neutral medical descriptor—no, he is taunting him.

The bully’s insult of his victim has two effects. Its main (intended) effect is to assert that the person’s mental skills are impaired and to taunt the person about this alleged impairment. Its secondary effect is to imply that people who *are* mentally retarded should be ashamed of this condition—to declare that it is a shameful characteristic worthy of ridicule. (After all, if it is not, then how is it an insult?) If enough schoolyard bullies use the term *retarded* in this way, then over time the term may take on an additional meaning, widely recognized as being intended as an insult. Moreover, the term may also become imbued with the insult’s implicit value judgment that mental retardation is shameful and worthy of ridicule.

Politically correct language is allegedly designed to solve this bullying problem and its etymological by-product. The practitioners of political correctness adopt the strategy of periodically replacing the words used as insults with new terms in an effort to avoid negative connotations imbued—or allegedly imbued—in existing terms.

Many terms pertaining to mental retardation have been replaced in this quest. The terms *moron*, *idiot*, *mentally retarded*, and others began their existence as medical

---

2. See, for example, the definition of the verb *retard* at <http://dictionary.reference.com/browse/retard>.

descriptors without implicit value judgments or rudeness built into them.<sup>3</sup> Over time, as people used them as insults (almost always directed at people who were *not* idiots, morons, or mentally retarded), these terms became imbued with negative connotations, including the implicit suggestion that being an idiot, a moron, or a mentally retarded person is shameful.<sup>4</sup>

### The “Euphemism Treadmill”

The word-replacement strategy that the advocates of political correctness pursue does not resolve itself in a single iteration or, indeed, in *any* number of iterations. Given the nature of the process of semantic change, the reason for this endlessness should be obvious. Because the creation of a new, politically correct term for, say, mental retardation does not change the underlying realities or the social dynamics that pertain to the subject, the new term gradually enters common circulation, and speakers use it in the same way that they previously used the preceding term. Those who wish to use it as a neutral descriptor do so, and those who wish to use it as an insulting term use it in that way.

The bullies remain bullies, and they do not curb their actions merely because a new word is now commonly used to refer to the characteristics that they wish to use as a basis for insulting people. A bully who formerly used the word *retarded* as a term of scorn can just as easily use the euphemism *differently abled* as a term of scorn by using a malicious tone of voice. Indeed, as feminist author Germaine Greer notes, “It is the fate of euphemisms to lose their function rapidly by association with the actuality of what they designate, so that they must be regularly replaced with euphemisms for themselves” (1971, 298).

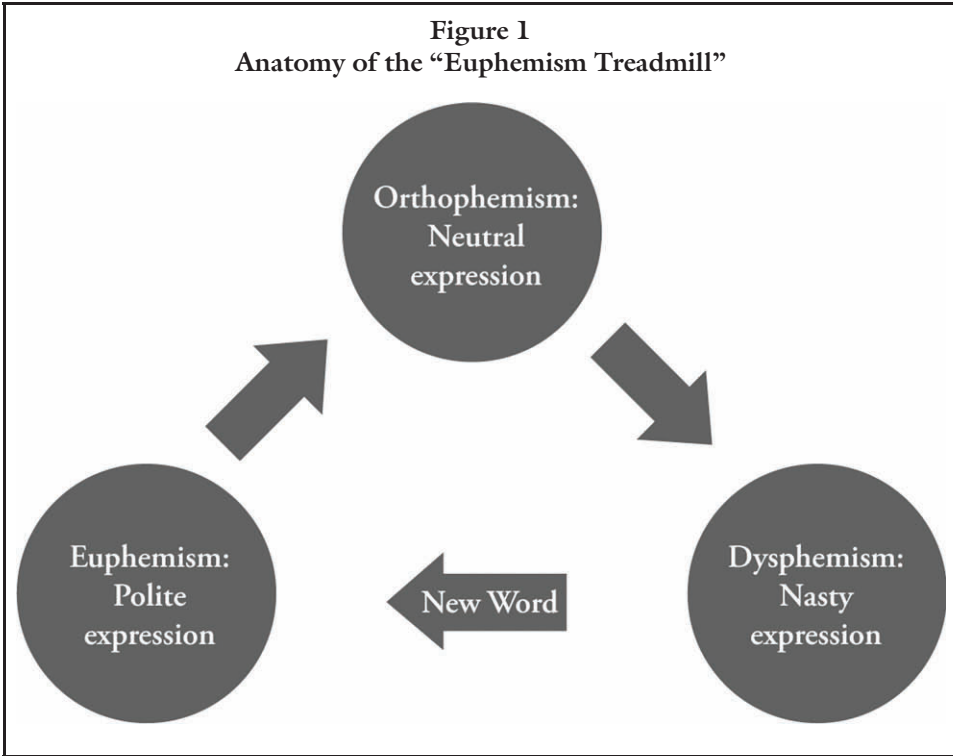
The word-replacement strategy of political correctness is therefore a cyclical one, giving rise to what has been dubbed “the euphemism treadmill” (Pinker 1994). In this process, an initially neutral term (an orthophemism) gradually takes on negative connotations through its use as an insult and thereby becomes a malicious term (a dysphemism). It is then replaced with a politically correct term (a euphemism), which gradually comes into common use and is then seen as the appropriate neutral expression (even if its lexicographical characteristics make it nonneutral). This process repeats itself again and again, as is illustrated in figure 1.

The “euphemism treadmill” is a slow process, but one that is nonetheless cyclical. Even when a term that resolves the problem of negative semantic change appears

---

3. The term *idiot* was originally a medical term used to refer to a person with an extreme form of mental retardation. The term *moron* was also originally a medical term to refer to a person with a less extreme but still severe form of mental retardation.

4. This judgment is obviously false and very unfair. Mental deficiency is not within the affected person’s control and therefore is not a characteristic of which anyone should be ashamed or one that should be used as the basis of ridicule. It is an unfortunate condition, but it is not the fault of the person afflicted by it. The correct value judgment here is that *mental retardation is bad*, but *mentally retarded people are not* (or, at least, if they are bad, it is not because of this condition).



to have been found, this victory is short-lived, and the new, neutral word eventually enters into circulation and is used by bullies as an insult. As long as the social dynamics remain the same, the cycle repeats itself indefinitely, resulting in a growing list of discarded dysphemisms—words such as *idiot*, *moron*, *spastic*, and so forth. Contradicting the claims made by advocates of politically correct language, linguist Armin Burkhardt explains that “as long as the prevailing taboo or discrimination prevails, another euphemism will be found or created by the speakers to replace the expression which is no longer felt to be euphemistic, and so on. The very moment a euphemism is commonly accepted, its former meaning fades and the search for a new euphemistic expression begins. Such euphemisations may occur several times throughout language history with regard to the same referent. . . . This explains why political correctness can never be successful over a long period of time” (Burkhardt 2010, 363).

Thus, the advocates for politically correct language commit themselves to a cyclical process of word replacement, creating a growing list of discarded terms, all of which are taken over exclusively as epithets. This process gives the schoolyard bully a buffet of insults, while encouraging others to alter their use of language periodically. Politically correct language is at best a short-term fix for the problem of semantic change and offensiveness. But can it claim even this accolade? To answer this

question, we need to look at the political correctness focus on terminology rather than on intent.

## The Politically Correctness Focus on Terms Rather Than on Intent

In order to encourage the use of its new terms, the periodic word-replacement strategy of politically correct language is accompanied by strong efforts to delegitimize the replaced terms by placing social stigma and other adverse pressure on those who continue to use them. Thus, to the politically correct, it is unacceptable in this day and age to continue to use the term *mentally retarded* in describing a mentally retarded person. To do so invites charges of insensitivity or bullying because some people use the term as an insult. To the politically correct, if *anyone* uses the word *retarded* in an offensive way, *everyone* who uses the word does so in an offensive way.

This leap is a serious error. After all, when a person makes remarks about someone else, the person's intention, whether to cause offense or not, is manifested in three observable factors: the language chosen, the context of the remarks, and the tone in which they are delivered. A person who intends to insult others does so primarily through tone of voice and requires no particular insulting language to do so (although insulting terms may be used).

Of these three factors, the movement for politically correct language sees only one decisive factor: the language chosen. By ignoring two of the three manifestations of the speaker's intent, including the most important one, advocates of politically correct language encourage people to take offense at remarks in which no offense is actually intended or implied, and the manifestations of an intention to offend are completely absent. They thereby encourage a breakdown in communication—an *intentional* effort to misconstrue others' remarks in order to take offense at them.

Indeed, to say that the enforcers of political correctness are hypersensitive is far too generous; by focusing solely on words and disregarding tone and context, they *manufacture* offense, even in situations where both the implications of remarks and the speaker's manifest intentions are benign. Observe that their attitude consists of an almost pathological touchiness to any remark that has even the most tenuous connection with an insult, a condition that is aggravated when the speaker is not a fellow traveler on the politically correct bandwagon. They make no effort to determine the speaker's intentions and even make an active effort to ignore them, so that they can justify their offense. Perpetual offense is their natural state, and touchiness is their *weltanschauung*. (Thus, in the remarks quoted earlier, Toynbee characterizes anyone who wants to use the word *queer* as a playground bully. For her, the rest of the sentence, its context, and its tone are irrelevant—it is “bile” regardless of how it is intended or actually delivered.)

What does this hypersensitivity mean for the *actual* playground bullies? It means that they win by default. As the advocates of politically correct language cede one word after another, refusing to allow for the possibility that these words can ever be delivered in a neutral or positive way through acceptable context or tone, the playground bullies succeed in capturing one word after another, imbuing them with offensive meanings without the slightest fight over them. Thus, we see the spectacle of an ever-increasing vocabulary of insults and purportedly offensive terms, along with a retreating and ever-changing list of socially acceptable terms. As surely as night follows day, the current politically correct terms *differently abled* and *having special needs*, if they catch on at all, will eventually become terms of insult and will be thrown onto the politically correct scrap heap. All that is required is for the terms to enter popular usage and start to be used by bullies in an insulting tone and context. We will then be presented with new terms, coupled with denunciations of those who continue to use the old language.

(One result of this process is that undeserved hostility is directed at elderly people, who are less likely to keep up with modern language trends. Their use of outdated, politically incorrect terms is often taken as evidence of bigotry even when such judgments have no basis in the speakers' actual views.)

Contrary to the claims of advocates for politically correct language, their true enemies are not playground bullies, but literate people who refuse to keep up with their periodic word replacements. By using these words in a neutral manner such people rehabilitate words that bullies try to use as insults. In contrast, the politically correct elite have already fled the battlefield, looking back with scorn at those of us who have chosen not to retreat with them.

The proper approach to dealing with the problem of negative semantic change is not as simple as word replacement. The *cause* of this semantic change is that words gradually become imbued with their *intended* negative connotations when they are used as insults. Hence, the primary requirement for preventing this kind of semantic change is to continue to use the existing words in circumstances that make it clear that no negative connotation is intended. If bullies use the word *retarded* as an insult, then the proper counter to this practice is to use the word properly, thereby demonstrating the bullies' foolishness and the word's *actual* meaning.

## The Devolution of Politically Correct Language

Constant changes in terms, though a nuisance, would not be a serious problem if the new descriptors chosen as politically correct terms retained the old terms' clarity and accuracy. But they do not do so. In practice, the drive for politically correct language is a devolution toward increasingly vague and euphemistic terms, a progression from honesty and clarity to dishonesty and obscurity.



Recall that the second alleged purpose of politically correct language is to discourage the reflexive use of words and thereby to promote conscious thinking about how to describe others fairly on their merits. In fact, however, the drive for politically correct language itself most aggressively promotes the reflexive use of words without thought as to correct description.

Observe that, in practice, political correctness achieves precisely the opposite of studious description. Politically correct language is narrow, faddish, and highly reflexive in character, consisting in large part of euphemisms. It sometimes promotes or amounts to outright dishonesty. Moreover, the drive for this kind of language involves aggressive attempts to delegitimize the use of politically incorrect terms that fail to keep up with current fashions. Accurately describing a person with correct and meaningful descriptors, even in a context where such description is necessary or useful, is treated as boorish or even sinister if sentences are not couched in the latest euphemisms. In many cases, politically correct language is designed to avoid or cover up clear and meaningful descriptions by promoting hostility toward candid and accurate descriptors that strip away these euphemisms.

Consider, for example, the evolution of descriptors used to describe people with a physical deformation or injury, such as a missing or nonfunctional limb. The term *lame* is now rather antiquated (a victim of the euphemism treadmill) and has also become a fairly broad term of offense, most commonly designating something that is boring, pointless, or passé. Terms such as *handicapped* and *disabled*, though perfectly accurate descriptors, are now also politically incorrect. For a while, the euphemism *physically challenged* replaced these terms, but now it too has been displaced by a euphemism even further removed from reality: the politically correct term *differently abled*.

In this terminological evolution, the progression of politically correct language has been *away* from more specific and accurate descriptors and *toward* more euphemistic and inaccurate ones. To state the obvious, which the latter terms attempt to suppress, we may note that, *ceteris paribus*, a nonfunctional or missing limb is a *bad* thing. It reduces the disabled persons' abilities and leaves them unable to do many useful things that they would have been able to do if they possessed a functional limb. The terms *handicapped* and *disabled* accurately describe this reality, and therefore they are unacceptable as a final stage in the evolution of politically correct language—unacceptable because they are too accurate. The term *physically challenged* imposes one layer of euphemism by reducing specific inabilities to mere “challenges,” dishonestly implying that the disability imposes no actual restriction. Yet even this term is unacceptable as a term of enduring, politically correct language because it retains a tenuous link with reality. Thus, the latest term, *differently abled*, suggests that no legitimate normative judgment applies to anyone's missing limbs, that having a stump for a leg is no better or worse than having a leg; it is merely *different* and entails *different* abilities.

A similar progression may be seen in other terms. *Mentally retarded*, an accurate term, has been replaced by the euphemism *mentally challenged* and in some cases with the advanced euphemism *having learning difficulties*. Again, each step in this devolution of language has involved a move toward greater euphemism and dishonesty. *Everyone* has learning difficulties at some time because learning can be difficult. This difficulty applies both to people who are mentally retarded and to those who are not. The difference between the former and the latter is not that the former have difficulties, whereas the latter cruise through life learning effortlessly. No, the difference is that the former are mentally impaired and simply *cannot* do some of the things that the latter can do.

As the foregoing examples illustrate, political correctness follows a kind of Gresham's Law for language, with each iteration of word replacement bringing to the fore a term that is vaguer and more euphemistic than its predecessor. In recent times, we have seen a serious degeneration in language, with asinine terms such *differently abled* being thrust upon an eye-rolling public.

### Politically Correct Language as a Fashion Accessory

Terminological devolution involving such concepts are driven almost exclusively by the practitioners of political correctness, who fancy themselves as fashionistas on the cutting-edge of this season's language. As in Parisian fashion houses, they show their style and class by adorning themselves in the latest creations, while only the uncivilized and boorish are caught with last season's merchandise.

The constant change in politically correct terms follows directly from a false dichotomy at the root of this movement and its attempts to monopolize polite conversation: the view that descriptions of people consist exclusively of two categories: politically correct euphemisms and horrible insults. When Toynbee defends the "inelegant circumlocutions" of politically correct language by saying that "inelegance is better than bile," she unwittingly states the belief at the heart of the politically correct: your only two options are politically correct euphemisms and bile.

For the politically correct elite on the cutting edge of this season's language fashions, it is impossible to conceive of a person's using the word *retarded* in a perfectly accurate way without harboring hatred or lack of sympathy toward mentally retarded people. The use of this word to describe accurately the process of slowed or diminished cognitive functioning shocks them because it fails to keep up with the latest trend—it is *so* last season.

Recall Toynbee's assertion that the term *political correctness* was "born as a coded cover for all who still want to say Paki, spastic or queer." Now consider these terms in detail. Observe that all of them were once neutral descriptors without negative connotations. "Paki" is short for "Pakistani," a person from Pakistan. *Spastic* was a medical term used to refer to someone with problems of the central nervous system that make them unable to control their muscle movements properly. The term

*queer* once meant strange, and it was later used as a descriptor of homosexuals, often affectionately by homosexuals themselves. All three of these words have been used neutrally or affectionately in various times and contexts. This usage occurred in a context and tone that made it clear that no offense was intended or implied. To the politically correct, however, such usage is now impossible, and anyone using such a word is nothing more than a schoolyard bully spewing bile. (In fact, the irony of this charge is that the derogatory sense of a term may become common mostly because the term was abandoned earlier by the practitioners of politically correct language. Using certain words in a neutral way becomes impossible precisely because they have been abandoned to the exclusive use of bullies for so long!)

The problem with this drive for politically correct language is that it attempts to deal with the problems of negative semantic change by outlawing accurate descriptors rather than by trying to rehabilitate them or to use them with proper context and tone. The advocates of politically correct language attempt to avoid the effects of negative semantic change by adopting a battle plan of constant retreat, thereby allowing every descriptor to be overrun eventually with vitriolic implications, real or imagined.

Once an accurate, precise, and formerly neutral descriptor is imbued by some with insulting overtones, it is no longer the height of fashion—its heyday is over, and the evacuation to a new word begins. Retreat comrades! Someone used the term *differently abled* in a nasty way! Retreat!

## Sensitivity and Honesty

The alleged sensitivity of the practitioners of political correctness is often betrayed by the vitriolic way they treat people who use politically incorrect language in contexts where the speakers clearly intend no offense. Moreover, even with regard to their alleged desire to be sensitive and helpful to the downtrodden, the practitioners of political correctness show a very warped view of sensitivity.

Let us suppose that you have a certain way of treating the people you meet and that you are already a fairly courteous and nice person. Ask yourself: What kind of *extra* help and courtesy should you afford to a man who has no legs and moves around in a wheelchair? If you thought that it might be nice to open doors for him or to pass him things that are out of reach when required, then good for you. Now ask yourself: What kind of *extra* help and courtesy should you afford to a person who is differently abled? If you thought of nothing, or at least nothing in particular, then you have good reason. *So what* if that person is differently abled? Everyone is! Hence, by implication, the person in question requires no extra help or courtesy beyond the normal help and courtesy extended to everyone.

Thus, if we take the politically correct euphemism at its word, we see that it is actually not useful at all in helping those it is supposedly intended to help. By suppressing information, the term actually encourages us to *ignore* any special needs

a person has. Only by recognizing the term as a euphemism and by making a separate (nonverbal) identification of the actual characteristics of the person under consideration can we act appropriately and sensitively. Even if we never speak any politically incorrect words, in our minds we identify what we are actually confronting, and we proceed accordingly.

Now try another one. Ask yourself: What kind of *extra* help and courtesy should you afford to a person who has a serious mental disability, such that he has the intelligence of a young child? If you thought that it would be a good idea to help him with what he is doing and perhaps to look out for his welfare, as you would with an actual child, then good for you. Now ask yourself: What kind of *extra* help and courtesy should you afford to a person who has special needs? If you immediately ask, “*What* special needs?” that question is only natural. Again, the politically correct term actually impedes the identification of information that is required to help the person. Again, only by recognizing the term as a euphemism and by making a separate (nonverbal) identification that the person is actually mentally retarded can we offer any help.

To illustrate the absurdity of the belief that euphemistic expression assists the downtrodden, author William Safire quotes the following sarcastic remark from a woman living in a slum: “I used to think I was poor. Then they told me I wasn’t poor, I was needy. They told me it was self-defeating to think of myself as needy, I was deprived. Then they told me underprivileged was overused. I was disadvantaged. I still don’t have a dime. But I have a great vocabulary” (qtd. in Burkhardt 2010, 363).

All of these examples are instances of an important general principle: sensitivity must always be sensitivity *to things that exist in reality*. We cannot be sensitive about a characteristic or circumstance that we refuse to acknowledge as fact. Thus, politically correct language does not assist us in helping others, but actually impairs our ability to do so by banishing all noneuphemistic descriptors of the problem. The entire operation of politically correct language operates on a nudge-and-a-wink level, with sensible actions being possible only by reading through the euphemisms to the underlying reality that they are designed to suppress.<sup>5</sup>

One may legitimately ask, Why bring attention to a physical or mental disability at all? Why rub these unfortunate facts in a person’s face by saying that the person is “disabled” or “retarded”? The answer here is that the context will determine when it is useful to make this observation and when it is unnecessary. Sensitivity may require that one avoid bringing to light unfortunate facts when there is no reason to do so,

---

5. Recall Hutton’s statement that “[i]t is right that the groups in society that used to be written off as mentally retarded are recognised as having special needs” (2001). Hutton implies that this development is a result of the use of politically correct language. Nonsense! Does anyone seriously maintain that people were *unaware* that those who are mentally retarded have special needs until Hutton and his ilk invented the euphemism *person with special needs*? And what good does this euphemism do, given that it removes the information (that is, the acknowledgment of mental retardation) that allows us to identify these special needs?

but it cannot require that one *suppress* the facts when there is a legitimate reason to discuss or identify them.

Of course, we may legitimately debate whether *crippled*, *disabled*, *handicapped*, or another term is the best, most accurate, and most sensitive term to use in a given context. But to move toward euphemistic terminology that is stripped of all meaning and to attack aggressively those who continue to use meaningful words are not examples of sensitivity. Indeed, in commenting on the current politically correct terms for racial groups, Pinker notes that “[w]e will know we have achieved equality and mutual respect when names for minorities stay put” (1994).

Some advocates of political correctness have argued that members of the referent group should choose the correct term and that the one they choose should be effectively beyond dispute by those outside the group.<sup>6</sup> Though people in the referent group will probably have a useful perspective on this issue, there is no reason that their preferences should be binding or that they should have veto power over accurate terminology. The matter should be resolved *objectively* with regard to *the reasons why* a particular term is preferred rather than with regard to the identity of the people who prefer it.

## Conclusion

Contrary to the claims of those who support the drive for politically correct language, such speech does not reduce offensive behavior or encourage conscious thinking about individual merits. In fact, it does the opposite: it relegates more and more terms to the exclusive domain of schoolyard bullies, while requiring unthinking, reflexive adherence to the latest stupid language fashions.

One of the most unfortunate effects of the drive for political correctness is that it encourages people to manufacture grievances and offense in innocuous situations, even where the speaker manifests no belligerent intent. The enemy of political correctness is not the schoolyard bully, but the studious, literate person who understands the proper meaning of words and wants to use them correctly.

The allegation that the very concept of political correctness is only an insidious right-wing myth cannot be taken seriously. One simply cannot insist that everyone should use terms such as *differently abled* while asserting that the notion of political correctness is a myth. The very nature of this preposterous euphemism demonstrates the effort that is being brought to bear to remove normative judgments from social discourse. It represents a clear attempt to imply (falsely) that disabilities are not really disabilities because We—the politically correct elite—

---

6. See, for example, the assertion by the Angry Black Woman: “I’ve always felt that a group, especially a minority group, has the right to guide the language concerning themselves, especially in the public square. What people do in their own homes can’t be dictated (nor should it be). If a group of people wants folks to refer to them as Differently-abled, then folks should. Even if folks on the outside don’t like having to do so” (2007).

say so. This term and many others are not mere “inelegant circumlocutions”; they are propaganda.

At the heart of politically correct language lies dishonesty, not civility. This reality is manifested in the preference for euphemism over literalism, for vagueness over specificity, and for propaganda over honesty. The politically correct society is not the civilized society, but rather the dishonest society.

## References

- Angry Black Woman. 2007. *In Defense of Political Correctness*. April 12. Available at <http://theangryblackwoman.com/2007/04/12/in-defense-of-political-correctness/>.
- Burkhardt, A. 2010. Euphemism and Truth. In *Topical Truth(s): The Epistemology of Metaphor and Other Tropes*, edited by A. Burkhardt and B. Nerlich, 355–72. New York: De Gruyter.
- Greer, G. 1971. *The Female Eunuch*. New York: Farrer, Straus and Giroux.
- Hutton, W. 2001. Words Really Are Important, Mr. Blunkett. *The Guardian*, December 16. Available at: <http://www.guardian.co.uk/politics/2001/dec/16/race.world>.
- Pinker, S. 1994. The Game of the Name. *New York Times*, April 5. Available at: [http://pinker.wjh.harvard.edu/articles/media/1994\\_04\\_03\\_newyorktimes.pdf](http://pinker.wjh.harvard.edu/articles/media/1994_04_03_newyorktimes.pdf).
- Toynbee, P. 2009. This Bold Equality Push Is Just What We Needed. *The Guardian*, April 28. Available at: <http://www.guardian.co.uk/commentisfree/2009/apr/28/toynbee-equality-bill-welfare>.