

Małgorzata MARTYNUSKA

GENDER-NEUTRAL ENGLISH – POLITICALLY CORRECT LANGUAGE IN THE U.S.A.

Political correctness as a phenomenon first received publicity in the media in 1970's when the *National Organization for Women* proposed such language revisions as *chair* or *chairperson* instead of *chairman*. But, as early as in the 1960's however, the Civil Rights movement had already demanded people of Afro-American origin to be called *black* instead of *Negro*.

The new phenomenon found recognition first of all in revision of words and terms concerning ethnicity or race.¹ According to PC language black people are to be called African-American whereas the preferred term for the people of oriental origin is Asian-American. Indians should be referred to as Native Americans.

Political correctness raised awareness that some language features may be oppressive for women and treat women and men unequally.² Thus, a great deal of equality vocabulary has been introduced such as *police officer* instead of *policeman* or *fire fighter* instead of *fireman*.

Discrimination of race, religion and sex is forbidden in all situations. Clubs designed for white males have been disappearing due to fears of legal action. The political correctness movement shows increasing tolerance, respect and sensitivity for a diversity of race, sexual preference, nationality, religion, age, physical handicap, alternative lifestyle or any situation or view that might differ from one's own. The aim of political correctness is to suppress all kinds of behaviour or statements which might be considered offensive, prejudicial or stereotypical – anything that might intimidate people or make them feel

¹ Positive and negative examples illustrating PC movement in reference to *people with disabilities, racism and sexism* are presented in „Fenomen *political correctness* a nauczanie języka angielskiego” by M. Stapińska (1998).

² For sociolinguistic analysis of sexism in English see *Language in Society* by S. Romaine (1989).

uneasy. It has been seen as merely a college issue but now PC seems to be present in everyday life of America.

Since people of different ethnic and racial backgrounds have been given new politically acceptable terms, a new culture of eliminating politically incorrect language and replacing it by acceptable terminology has emerged.

Another concern for the PC movement is terms connected with *ageism*, e.g. elderly people should be referred to as *senior citizens* instead of *old-age pensioners* to avoid the negative connotations of the word *old*.

People's appearance has been another sensitive issue discussed by PC activists. The aim of political correctness is not only to avoid discrimination of unattractive people but also not to notice any difference concerning the way people look.

Using politically correct language means being polite and tolerant to others. However, PC may be sometimes seen as overtly sensitive in trying to avoid offending anyone. Opponents of political correctness claim that the case is becoming so significant that ordinary people are no longer certain if their everyday language is acceptable. New terms designed to be accurate may in fact cause confusion.

The PC movement is an interesting phenomenon and constantly inspires both the activists and opponents of political correctness to create new terminology³ which may be considered as designed to make people laugh.

Examples of politically unacceptable terms and their preferred alternatives:

<i>politically incorrect term</i>	<i>politically correct term</i>
drug addict	<i>chemically challenged</i>
cheating (in school)	<i>academic dishonesty</i>
short people	<i>vertically challenged</i>
blind people	<i>visually challenged</i>
mute people	<i>vocally challenged</i>
ugly people	<i>aesthetically challenged</i>
deaf people	<i>aurally challenged</i>
retarded people	<i>mentally challenged,</i> <i>knowledge-base non-processors</i>
fat people	<i>alternative body image</i>
disabled people	<i>mobility challenged</i>
bald people	<i>comb – free,</i> <i>follicley challenged</i>
smoker	<i>nicotine dependant</i>

³ Examples of new terminology created as a result of PC movement are presented in *Varieties of English* by D. Freeborn (1994).

The original intentions of political correctness were sound and honourable. The PC activists still argue that language should recognise tolerance and equality in a multi-cultural society such as the United States. Nevertheless, made by them language changes are often too funny or difficult to be accepted by ordinary people.

American English displays a fondness for positive feelings. Nobody is a failure but experiences "deficiency rating". Nobody says they were close to death but simply "felt the power of life". Firms with shares falling on the stock exchange do not make losses but "have no profits". Candidates who did not get a job were "chosen negatively". In the dynamic language of business each problem is considered "a challenge" and making employees redundant is "company adjustment to the proper size" or "downsizing".

Politically correct language should be *non-sexist* which means *gender-neutral*. The practice of assigning masculine gender to neutral terms comes from the fact that every language reflects the prejudices of the society in which it evolved, and English evolved through most of its history in a male-centred society.⁴

Some terms naturally apply to people of a certain sex. Statements concerning the legal position of husbands, mothers are examples. However, many statements apply to people of unknown sex, e.g. the word *trustee* may be used to designate a person who is male, female or a corporation. Such complexity may cause problems if the speaker wants to use pronouns: *he, she, him, her, his, hers, himself, herself, it, its, itself*. The use of these pronouns is appropriate when the context has established that the particular person referred to is of a particular sex or capacity, e.g.:

- *The trustee, when **he** made that investment, was in breach of **his** duty to the beneficiary.*
- *The trustee, when **she** made that investment, was in breach of **her** duty to the beneficiary.*
- *The trustee, when **it** made that investment, was in breach of **its** duty to the beneficiary.*

Proper usage becomes more problematic when the person has no characteristics that dictate the use of particular pronouns. How should this sentence be completed?

The trustee, when [...] makes that kind of investment, is in breach of (...) duty to the beneficiary.

For many, the answer is clear – the masculine pronouns embrace all entities and filling the blanks with *he* and *his* is acceptable and appropriate. Others

⁴ For further discussion on linguistics and sexism in a society see „Feministki i seksizm w języku angielskim” by A. Gross-Kołoczek (1998).

challenge this view as politically incorrect. The statements starting with "The student/judge/critic he" ignore the fact that this person could be a woman and can not be considered as gender-neutral. There are several ways of avoiding excluding women when using masculine pronouns:⁵

1. Recast into plural.

Example: *Give each student his paper as soon as he has finished.*

Alternative: *Give students their papers as soon as they have finished.*

2. Reword to eliminate gender problems.

Example: *The average student is worried about his grades.*

Alternative: *The average student is worried about grades.*

3. Replace the masculine pronoun with *HE* or *SHE/HIS* or *HER*.

Example: *If the student was satisfied with his performance on the pretest, he took the post-test.*

Alternative: *A student who was satisfied with her or his performance on the pretest took the post-test.*

4. Alternate male and female examples and expressions (be careful not to cause confusion).

Example: *Let each student participate. Has he had a chance to talk? Could he feel left out?*

Alternative: *Let each student participate. Has she had a chance to talk? Could he feel left out?*

5. Replace masculine pronoun with indefinite article *A*.

Example: *After filling out his class schedule, the student should place it in the basket.*

Alternative: *After filling out a class schedule, the student should place it in the basket.*

6. Replace masculine pronoun with definite article *THE*.

Example: *A well-advised testator will review his will from time to time to ensure that it continues to provide for an appropriate distribution of his estate.*

Alternative: *A well-advised testator will review the will from time to time to ensure that it continues to provide for an appropriate distribution of the estate.*

7. Replace masculine pronoun with *YOU/YOUR*.

Example: *The driver should take his completed registration form and pay his license fee.*

Alternative: *You should take your completed registration form and pay your license fee.*

⁵ For practical examples see *The Non-sexist Communicator* by Bobbye D. Sorrels (1983) and "Doing without the generic he/man in technical communication" by Barbara Christian (1986).

8. Replace masculine pronoun with *ONE*.

Example: *He who loves the battle sometimes wins the war.*

Alternative: *One who loves the battle sometimes wins the war.*

9. The *WHOSE* solution.

Example: *Any third party would be justified in exercising great caution in dealings with an attorney who derives his authority from an instrument framed in this fashion.*

Alternative: *Any third party would be justified in exercising great caution in dealing with an attorney whose authority is based on an instrument framed in this fashion.*

10. Use the *Passive Voice*.

Example: *If a student wishes to avoid sex bias in his writing, he should examine these alternatives.*

Alternative: *These alternatives should be examined by any student who wishes to avoid sex bias in writing.*

11. Use *PERSONALLY* where appropriate.

Example: *This liability will arise even though the owner is guilty of no wrongful act himself.*

Alternative: *This liability will arise even though the owner is not personally guilty of a wrongful act.*

The problem of gender-neutral language applies not only to pronouns but also other areas of linguistics. The word *man* is ambiguous: it can mean either *human being* or *male human being*. Thus, the use of *man* as a generic term is not politically correct because it leads to the exclusion of women.⁶ However, even when authors insist that *man* is a general term for all humans, they can lapse into using it as a term only for males.

Thomas Jefferson did not mean women and men saying *all men are created equal* and *governments are instituted among men, deriving their just powers from the consent of the governed*. In a time when women had no vote, Jefferson was using the word *men* in its principal sense of males and it probably never occurred to him that anyone would think otherwise.

Also when we search dictionary entries for the word *man* it turns out that the definitions apply to males. We would never say a sentence *A girl grows up to be a man*. After realising how problematic the usage of the word *man* for both sexes may be, we must agree that there is a need for another *gender-neutral* term, e.g. *humankind*, *people*.

⁶ For social theory see *Man Made Language* by Dale Spender (1980).

The majority of publishers and academic groups such as *The American Psychological Association* or *The Associated Press* have supported the use of gender-neutral language. Newspapers such as *The New York Times* or *The Wall Street Journal* try to avoid the language which could be considered *sexist*.

There is one more aspect that makes *gender-neutral* language desirable. We will be able to present our ideas more clearly and precisely allowing us to enhance our communicative skills, e.g. instead of using the word *workmen* we can describe precisely if we mean carpenters, plumbers or architects, etc.

The change in the usage of masculine pronouns will make our language more interesting since we will have to use many different forms and structures. Instead of a boring sentence *Stone-age man found ways to tame his environment* we can say, e.g. *Stone-age agriculturists and hunters used their survival skills to tame their environment*.

Examples of sexist terms and their *gender-neutral* alternatives:⁷

<i>sexist terms</i>	<i>non-sexist alternatives</i>
<i>Man</i>	<i>human beings, humankind, men and women, women and men, the individual</i>
<i>man's achievements</i>	<i>human achievements</i>
<i>the best man for the job</i>	<i>the best person for the job, the best man and woman for the job</i>
<i>manpower</i>	<i>workforce, personnel, the staff, the workers</i>
<i>the common man</i>	<i>the average person, ordinary people, people in general</i>
<i>man-made</i>	<i>synthetic, manufactured</i>
<i>man hours</i>	<i>hours, working time, staff-hours</i>
<i>man the desk</i>	<i>staff the desk</i>
<i>chairman</i>	<i>chairperson, chair, convenor, mediator, coordinator</i>
<i>businessman</i>	<i>business executive, business person</i>
<i>foreman</i>	<i>supervisor</i>
<i>policeman, policewoman</i>	<i>police officer</i>
<i>fireman</i>	<i>fire fighter</i>
<i>mailman</i>	<i>mail carrier</i>
<i>steward and stewardess</i>	<i>flight attendant</i>
<i>congressman</i>	<i>congressional representative</i>

Critics have been describing political correctness as a new social code which needs to be obeyed to gain acceptance of a particular society. Political correctness with its aim of limiting prejudice has, in turn, become a form

⁷ Practical examples are taken from *The Handbook of Nonsexist Writing for Writers, Editors and Speakers* by Casey Miller and Kate Swift (1980).

of intolerance itself. Thus, we may conclude that the PC movement reflects inefficiencies in coping with problems of prejudice and intolerance. How can we make some social changes if we can not talk about problematic issues using their real names? To some degree political correctness is a part of a problem which had only its name changed instead of being solved.

At least one aim of the PC movement has been certainly achieved. People have become more aware of the fact that the language they use may be a tool of intolerance.

References

- Christian, B.** 1986. "Doing without the generic he/man in technical communication". *Journal of Technical Writing and Communication* 16. 87–98.
- Columas, Florian, ed.** 1997. *The Handbook of Sociolinguistics*. UK: Blackwell Publishers Ltd.
- Faul, S.** 1997. *Poradnik ksenofoba. Amerykanie*. Warszawa: Wydawnictwo Adamantan.
- Freeborn, D.** 1994. *Varieties of English: An Introduction to the Study of Language*. London: Macmillan.
- Garner, J. F.** 1997. *Politycznie poprawne bajki na dobranoc*. Poznań: Zysk i S-ka.
- Gross-Koloczek, A.** 1998. „Feministki i seksizm w języku angielskim”. *Biuletyn Glottodydaktyczny Studium Praktycznej Nauki Języków Obcych Uniwersytetu Jagiellońskiego*, K. Korus, A. Lubecka (eds.), No. 4, 25–33. Kraków: Księgarnia Akademicka Wydawnictwo Naukowe.
- Miller, C. and K. Swift** 1980. *The Handbook of Nonsexist Writing for Writers, Editors and Speakers*. New York: Lippincott & Crowell.
- Nilsen, A. P.** 1984. "Winning the great he/she battle". *College English* 46. 151–157.
- Romaine, S.** 1994. *Language in Society: An Introduction to Sociolinguistics*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Sorrels, B.** 1980. *The Non-sexist Communicator*. Sydney: Prentice-Hall of Australia Ltd.
- Spender, D.** 1980. *Man Made Language*. Melbourne: Routledge and Kegan Paul.
- Stapińska, M.** 1998. „Fenomen political correctness a nauczanie języka angielskiego”. *Biuletyn Glottodydaktyczny Studium Praktycznej Nauki Języków Obcych Uniwersytetu Jagiellońskiego*, K. Korus, A. Lubecka (eds.), No. 4, 11–23. Kraków: Księgarnia Akademicka Wydawnictwo Naukowe.