

# **SOME CULTURAL CONSIDERATIONS IN SECOND LANGUAGE EDUCATION**

As the world as we know it has come of age, and the appreciation of other cultures and lifestyles and what they add to the progress and enhancement of national and world welfare has become apparent, there has arisen an awareness of the benefits and necessity of “leveling the playing field,” in order that all citizens have equal access to both services and opportunities. The need to correct negative and unproductive stereotypes and clichés in the public’s perception has come to be seen as a priority. Like many new paradigms, the process has brought along with it abuses and overcompensations that with time have been, or are being, dealt with.

In the United States specifically, the terms “multi-culturalism” and “diversity” have come to be seen as ends in themselves, with sometimes little thought given to what goals are sought after and what results are being attained through the application of these social constructs. On the one hand, opportunities for richer, more fulfilling lifestyles have become available to previously disfavored social groups, a result beneficial to society as a whole. On the other hand, attempts to create these opportunities have inevitably led to the exclusion of other elements of the population.

At one time, a talented, creative, intelligent, brilliant even, black female such as Condoleeza Rice may have been relegated to a position somewhere secondary to a mediocre white male. Being able to take her place as a world leader has been beneficial to the world at large (this is by no means a political judgment). On the other hand, qualified, hard working white males have been excluded from opportunities they had been otherwise entitled to as a result of circumstances beyond their control necessitated by a perceived need to equalize opportunities.

Miller & Smith (1981) posit that standard English is considered to be sexist (patriarchal), racist (white) and Eurocentered (Anglo- Saxon), and that male, white, and Eurocentered are the norms, and inherently discriminatory to those who are not part of the norm. In and of itself this explains a desire among some to correct the language. What is left to grapple with however is the multiplicity of norms

and favored groups (bald/not bald, thin/not thin, young/old, tall/short, etc, etc, etc) and to what extent a total lexical makeover might be needed to cover all the possibilities, an arguably unrealistic as well as inappropriate goal.

Aside from strategic results, tactical efforts were at times extreme, as befits perhaps a revolutionary era. During the late '60's American females were removing their bras en masse as a means of dramatizing their equality, while school districts throughout the US were struggling with problematic demographic population statistics in an attempt to have every school reflect a Byzantine variety of ethnic representations, leading in many instances to children being transported by bus to neighborhoods far away from their homes both logistically and culturally.

The difficulty of measuring the results of these attempts at sociological micro managing is, of course, a real issue, beyond the scope of this paper, but professional material purporting to do so often reminds me of the American writer and humanist, Samuel Clemens (Mark Twain) who popularized the phrase, "There are three types of lies: lies, damned lies, and statistics."

Nevertheless, the subject bears examination as critical background to the overall issue of language/cultural bias in English Language material.

In the US, it began with the long overdue recognition of the inequities, both in law and in fact, of the country's black minority. The landmark *Brown vs. Board of Education* ruling by the United States Supreme Court in 1954 established the illegality of segregating public schools along racial lines. The efforts that followed, attempting to correct the situation, both de facto and de jure became part of a broader, international response to a variety of perceived political and social injustices leading to major street riots in Paris and Chicago in the 1960's, and continuing with the intellectual and cultural ferment that characterized Europe and the United States throughout the 1970's.

So called 'Affirmative Action' programs were created, beginning in the 1960's that were designed to compensate for perceived inequities, both present and past. "Minority" groups of various kinds were targeted as recipients of benefits that might enable the members of these groups to attain cultural and economic parity with the 'privileged' group. Exactly who deserved this protection, however, and who

was classified a member of the privileged group became, as might be expected, a matter of some debate.

The United States was a country of immigrants, and the lot of first and second generation immigrants was often one of discrimination and rejection. Leaving behind them the insecurities, lack of opportunities, and sometimes persecution of their native lands, the newcomers were welcomed by an America that was in the midst of expanding and industrializing, with both opportunity and need for those wanting to work and willing to endure the hostility of the groups who were already established. Irish, Germans, Chinese, Italians, Jewish refugees from Eastern Europe, Poles and others came to the United States in droves during the period between roughly 1840 and 1930, often meeting with attitudes as expressed in the American 19<sup>th</sup> Century lament written in 1862 by one John Poole:

*"I'm a decent boy just landed  
From the town of Ballyfad;  
I want a situation, yes,  
And want it very bad.  
I have seen employment advertised,  
"It's just the thing," says I,  
"But the dirty spalpeen ended with  
'No Irish Need Apply.' "*

So, when Irish firemen in Boston and New York, sons and grandsons of Irish immigrants who had overcome by sheer will, perseverance and hard work the 'no Irish need apply' constraints, or Jewish and Chinese applicants to prestigious universities and medical schools, who were offspring of parents or grandparents who had sacrificed to reach this stage of economic, social and professional success and assimilation (and who were still subject to anti Semitic and anti Asian attitudes) were asked to step aside in the name of Affirmative Action, it was sometimes a bitter pill to swallow. Asians, for instance are by and large excluded from minority benefits, regardless of their history of exploitation and persecution in the United States, in spite of which in 2005, 50% of Asian-Americans over the age of

twenty five, "... have a bachelor's degree or higher level of education. Asians have the highest proportion of college graduates of any race or ethnic group in the country." (US Census Bureau, 'Facts for Features' CB05-FF.06-2 April 29, 2005). Ironically, they are a victim of their own success. Nevertheless, the goal of integrating more blacks into American society was achieved, certainly to the overall benefit of the country as a whole, in spite of the sometimes heavy handed methods.

The current question, arguably a political rather than a social one, with entrenched supporters with vested interests on either side of the issue, is whether or not the favoring of particular groups, ethnic or otherwise has served its purpose and should be discontinued. The reasons given for continuance of the policy relate to a need to create equal and fair opportunity for perceived disfavored groups. The reasons for discontinuing the policy go back to Martin Luther King's seminal 1963 "I have a dream" speech in which he looked forward to the day when people "...will not be judged by the color of their skin but by the content of their character." Ironically, many African American professionals are dismayed by the irony of their sometimes being mistakenly perceived in the black as well as the white communities as somehow inferior in their fields as a result of having not had to live up to the standards set for whites in the same field. Shelby Steele (1990), a black author and intellectual of note, in an analysis of social programs in America, relates in his book, *The Content of Our Characters: a New Vision of Race in America*:

"Suffering can be endured and overcome, it cannot be repaid. Blacks cannot be repaid for injustice done to the race, but we can be corrupted by society's guilty gestures of repayment."

In 1995, after a bitter debate, one of the more ironic sidelights being that the major figure in favor of abolishing a system which favored black applicants was the black president of the California Board of Regents, while the main proponent of the system which disfavored Asian applicants was himself Asian, California abolished race based preferences in their State University System, a system which includes some of the most competitive and prestigious schools in the country. Since that time several other large universities have either abolished or modified their race based admission policies.

But while the principle of Affirmative Action continues to be debated 45 years after its implementation, it has given rise to some interesting lexical concepts, not least of which is the unique connotation of the word, “minority.”

It is always interesting to see the language change in front of our very eyes. Lakoff (1993), gives credit to Michael Reddy(1993) for calling attention to the fact that behavior is determined by what he calls ‘our metaphorical understanding of experience.’ Lakoff then goes on to explain his theory of what he refers to as conceptual metaphors. Although he doesn’t mention it, some time between approximately 1954 and 1964, the metaphor of the ‘minority’ as an obligatory responsibility was born and persists. One of the founding principles of the United States was the protection of the rights of so called minority groups and a repugnance to the concept of a ‘tyranny of the majority.’ It quickly became popular to refer to Affirmative Action programs in terms of addressing ‘minority rights.’ Confusion rapidly ensued as other special interest groups began to press claims. It became hard to sort out, for instance whether children of exploited white working class families could be considered eligible for assistance since they were not racially or ethnically part of a minority population group.

For reasons beyond the scope of this paper, this particular use of the term, ‘minority,’ rather than being allowed to take the usual route to linguistic obsolescence and replacement and dying a natural death, stubbornly persisted. Attempts to define it within this context sometimes border on the bizarre.

Minority Rights Group International, a long established advocacy group, defines minorities as “non-dominant ethnic, religious and linguistic communities” ([www.minorityrights.org](http://www.minorityrights.org)), a quite effective method of divorcing the concept of ‘minority’ from quantitative restraints. In what seems however, to be the ultimate contradiction, their 2006 report refers to the *entire population* of a country as a ‘minority,’ commenting that “Iraqis head a new list of peoples under threat from persecution,” and then going on to enumerate the threatened peoples as “Sunni, Sh’ia, Kurds, Christians and other populations.”

Various methods of coping with this socio-linguistic inconsistency have arisen, chief of which is the hyphenated ethnicity, i.e, Irish-American, Chinese-American, Italian-American, etc. Groups such as

these can now advocate for advantages based on minority status and many are in fact much smaller proportions of the US population than black Americans, who have now become African-Americans and, according to the United States Census Bureau for the year 2000, made up 12.6% of the population (US Census Bureau, 2000 census). The birth of the hyphenated identity usage, of course, is, in addition to being a result of a complex confluence of social, cultural and psychological factors, also a contemporary reflection of the way in which human discourse evolves and changes.

A key mover in the process is the concept of political correctness (or PC). Dorothy Smith (1999) talks about political correctness as an ‘organizer of public discourse.’ The etymology of the word is vague, but its usage ranges from serious judgments to irony. To be ‘politically correct,’ is generally meant to imply a concern for the feelings and rights of others and politically correct language is meant to reflect that and to be inclusive and non judgmental. As a result, a variety of euphemisms and other changes have entered the language. Waitresses, for instance became ‘waitpersons,’ and when that became viewed as too cumbersome, it evolved into the current genderless ‘server,’ although the restaurant serving staff is still referred to as the ‘wait staff.’ ‘Chairman’ was removed from the general vocabulary to be replaced by the ubiquitous ‘chairperson,’ although there has been a recent shortening to ‘chair.’

The word ‘challenged’ (as in ‘visually challenged’) has been applied to a variety of physical and mental issues once referred to as disabilities or handicaps, and as homosexuality (no longer a politically correct term by the way) has become an increasingly politicized issue, not only has the former pejorative terminology (fag, dyke, etc), thankfully disappeared from the scene, but a host of attempts to redefine the finer points of variations in sexual practices and gender identity has entered the acceptable corpus (gay, transgender, cross dresser, etc).

There have been some notably unsuccessful attempts at change (replacing the allegedly male biased word ‘history’ with ‘herstory’ is one example) and an infinite number of apocryphal anecdotes along those lines such as the motorist calling for aid for his/her ‘mechanically challenged’ vehicle, and the the family Hoffman considering a name change to Hoffperson.

The language of PC has been seen by some as a sort of reflection of the Sapir-Whorf theory, which states that our language controls our attitudes. Since, however, PC is such a conscious and emotionally charged social issue, I would argue that the connection is only a tenuous one and might more accurately be seen as our attitudes controlling our language.

Ironically, in its attempts to be inclusive and value neutral in all areas of group identity, PC language has often gone to such extremes that lexical meaning is sacrificed on the altar of allegedly neutral terminology. As a result the words 'politically correct' have sometimes taken on a pejorative aspect and applied to mean a distortion of truth in order to advance a particular ideology. A satirical characterization making the rounds of the internet, posits a politically correct version of the simple sentence, 'The fireman put a ladder up against the tree, climbed it, and rescued the cat,' into:

"The firefighter( who happened to be male, but could just as easily have been female) abridged the rights of the cat to determine for itself where it wanted to walk, climb, or rest, and inflicted his own value judgments in determining that it needed to be 'rescued' from its chosen perch. In callous disregard of the well being of the environment, and this tree in particular, he thrust his 'mobility-disadvantaged' unfriendly means of ascent known as a 'ladder' carelessly up against the tree, marring its bark, and unfeelingly climbed it, unconcerned how his display of physical prowess might injure the self-esteem of those differently-abled. He kidnapped and unjustly restrained the innocent feline with the intention of returning it to the person who claimed to 'own' the naturally free animal."

And Bill Veeck, well known baseball team owner, in his 1962 autobiography, *Veeck- As in Wreck* , took personal issue with others' attempts to define him according to a PC concept. In his last chapter, titled 'I'm not handicapped; I'm crippled,' he wrote:

*...It has become customary in our euphemistic world to describe us cripples as 'handicapped' ...I don't believe I am. I can do anything that anybody else can do that doesn't involve quick sprints, high jumps and a fast buck and wing. And so, although I am crippled, I am **not** handicapped.*

Perhaps more ominously, one of the objections to artificially imposed speech codes is their similarity to George Orwell's 'newspeak,' a form of thought control. As described in his novel, *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, it is a means of gradually narrowing the language down in order to 'make thoughtcrime literally impossible.' Critics of PC feel that the vagueness of the categories lends itself to a form of Orwellian thought police that can conceivably make 'incorrect thought' virtually impossible.

The American Psychiatric Association (APA), is considered one of the authoritative sources used as a standard for all matters of style in academic writing. Although they are most widely used and known for conventions of citing sources, they have a wide general influence. In the APA Manual for 2005, excerpts of which can be accessed at [www.apaonline.org](http://www.apaonline.org), the following advice can be found:

In the phrase, *the sample included 400 undergraduate students*

**Change To** *the sample of 400 undergraduate students included 250 Whites (125 males and 125 females) and 150 Blacks (75 males and 75 females).*

In the phrase, *women's **sexual partners** should use condoms*

**Change To** *women's **male sexual partners** should use condoms.*

In the phrase, *ten subjects were **married** and five were **single***

**Change To** *ten subjects were legally married, three were living with heterosexual partners, and two were living with lesbian partners*

In the phrase, *Questionnaire item: Have you ever engaged in sexual intercourse?*

**Change To** *Questionnaire item: Have you ever engaged in penile/vaginal intercourse?*

And in a really crucial insight, **change:** *The male antelopes were **bisexual**.*

**To:** *The male antelopes were observed to engage in both **male-male and male-female sexual behavior!***

Gary Trudeau, the American cartoonist and satirist, famous for his nationally syndicated *Doonesbury* comic strip poked fun at some of the PC excesses in an address to the 1991 graduating class at Yale University. He began with the opening lines:

Dean Kagan, distinguished faculty, parents, friends, graduating seniors, Secret Service, class agents, people of class, people of color, colorful people, people of height, the vertically constrained, people of hair, the differently coiffed, the optically challenged, the temporarily sighted, the insightful, the out of sight, the out-of-towners, the Eurocentrics, the Afrocentrics, the Afrocentrics with Eurailpasses, the eccentrically inclined, the sexually disinclined, people of sex, sexy people, sexist pigs, animal companions, friends of the earth, friends of the boss, the temporarily employed, the differently employed, the differently optioned, people with options, people with stock options, the divestitursts, the deconstructionist, the home constructionist, the homeboys, the homeless, the temporarily housed at home, and God save us, the permanently housed at home.... (Gary Trudeau from the opening of his Class Day speech at Yale).

With the United States concern with being sure that all its citizens were treated equally, the concept gradually evolved that having a diverse group, whether on campus or in the corporation, was a desired goal in and of itself. The terms ‘multi culturalism’ and ‘diversity’ entered the vocabulary full blown as meaning a given state of grace, replacing the “melting pot” concept of cultural assimilation of earlier

days. Although the terms and concepts seem simple and innocuous enough, the pragmatic aspects sometimes tell a far different story. A glance at countries such as Lebanon and Iraq, and the tragic results of the dissolution of Yugoslavia should be enough to counsel an attitude of caution and prudence.

Schon (1993), among many others, refers to 'frame conflict' and is concerned with a perceived tendency to resolve social issues without adequately considering what actually has to be dealt with; to come up with answers without having applied the right questions. He argues that unforeseen and unintended consequences are often the result of framing the issues improperly.

Universities commonly have Diversity Directors, books and courses are given on 'diversity training' and achieving 'multiculturalism.' Pressure is often put to promote a variety of limited agendas, often more exclusive than inclusive.

In his book, *Nationalism Without Walls: the Unbearable Lightness of Being Canadian*, Canadian author and journalist Richard Gwyn ponders the 'lightness' of the Canadian identity and what may be lost through the overlay and mixing of other cultures. Hardly xenophobic, Gwyn considers the loss of a sense of history, and although realizing the positive contributions of a diverse multicultural society, he points out the dangers of the hyphenated Canadian identities leading to a country made up of a diverse grouping of self interested identity groups competing with each other and losing sight of the sometimes ephemeral common good.

With the obsolescence in the United States of the melting pot concept that I was brought up with, embodied in Emma Lazarus' poem engraved on base of the Statue of Liberty (*Give me your tired, your poor, your huddled masses yearning to breathe free....*), the pressures of identity politics threatens to fragment what is left of a uniquely American identity. The hyphenated American becomes only half American. A generation ago, with all its social problems, there was a distinctly American identity, an ethos of self actualization, of unlimited possibilities, and even those ethnic and social groups forcibly or subtly kept at arms length strived for entry into the dominant group, and the unwashed, uneducated and unwanted immigrants of those times often lived to see their offspring succeed in their chosen culture.

The pendulum of politics and social and cultural convention always swings back and forth, eventually finding stasis. Certainly, America, as well as other nations, has witnessed tremendous progress in improving the lives of all its residents, and the top echelons in government, on both sides of the aisle in Congress, as well as in the judicial and executive branches, include a variety of minority ethnic and racial representatives, as well as a female Secretary of State, Speaker of the House and major Presidential contender.

The road to the current state of affairs is reflected in the lexis and semantic changes and customs of the past fifty years, and a knowledge of the usage and pragmatics as laid out in this brief article should be extremely helpful, indeed essential in the classroom.

The area of social change in America over the last fifty years offers a wealth of easily accessible research material. English Language classrooms can find abundant opportunity for examining language development, as well as manipulation, in the culture wars involving what is referred to as 'minority rights.' Areas of cultural stereotyping abound, as do cross cultural issues.

American film offers additional opportunities. Films such as *Some Like It Hot*, and *My Fair Lady* can be used to look into gender and stereotyping in American culture and language, as can more recent films, such as *Crash*.

A relatively late arrival in the minority rights arena has been the conflict over what has been referred to as 'gay rights,' although that has become in itself a politically incorrect term, an illustration of the transient and sometimes vague goals of identity politics. The correct terminology currently is, I believe (things change so rapidly it's hard to keep pace), gay, lesbian, transgender, bisexual and cross dresser rights.

Gay rights issues do not seem to be major areas of concern in Eastern Europe. To the best of my knowledge, people here do not define themselves by their sexual practices to the extent that Americans do. However, the area is one of major controversy in the United States, and linguistic issues resonate. The curious application of the word 'gay,' not to mention 'straight,' for instance, and the concept of 'gay pride,' can be areas of interest. Same sex marriage has become a major political issue and has given rise to debate as to what the word 'marriage' actually signifies.

As Humpty Dumpty famously stated to Alice in Lewis Carroll's *Through the Looking Glass*:

"When I use a word," Humpty Dumpty said in rather a scornful tone.....it means just what I choose it to mean..neither more nor less."

"The question is," said Alice, "whether you can make words mean so many different things."

"The question is", said Humpty Dumpty, "which is to be the master..that's all."

The cultural upheaval that has transpired over the last fifty years in the United States is a source of infinite and ever developing potential for the English classroom.

## REFERENCES

- American Psychiatric Association. 2005. *Style Guide*. <http://www.apaonline.org>
- Gwyn, Richard. 1996. *Nationalism Without Walls: the Unbearable Lightness of Being Canadian*. Toronto: McClellan & Stewart
- Lasky, Melvin. 2002. *The Language of Journalism*. New Brunswick, NJ: Transaction Publishers
- Lakoff, George. 1993. 'The contemporary theory of metaphor.' In Ortony, A. (ed) *Metaphor and Thought* (2nd ed.). Cambridge: Cambridge University Press
- Miller, Casey & Swift, Kate 1981. *The handbook of non-sexist writing for writers, editors and speakers*. London: The Women's Press.
- Minority Rights Group International. 2006. <http://www.minorityrights.org>
- Reddy, Michael. 1993. 'The conduit metaphor: A case of frame conflict in our language about language.' ' In Ortony, A. (ed) *Metaphor and Thought* (2nd ed.). Cambridge: Cambridge University Press
- Schon, Donald. 1993. 'Generative Metaphor: A perspective on problem-setting in social policy.' In Ortony, A. (ed) *Metaphor and Thought* (2nd ed.). Cambridge: Cambridge University Press
- Smith, Dorothy. 1999. *Writing the Social: Critique, Theory and Investigations*. Toronto: University Press
- Steele, Shelby. 1990. *The Content of Our Character: a New Vision of Race in America*. New York: St. Martin's Press
- Veeck, Bill. 2001 (originally published 1962). *Veeck-As In Wreck: The Autobiography of Bill Veeck*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press