

EUPHEMISTICS  
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Genteel words always appear to soften but too often merely mask meanness in the world. It is worth noting that the rise of politically correct speech has coincided almost exactly with the great increase of wealth and income disparity in the USA. Indeed, our current politically correct imperative has engorged the glossary of Twinkie terms with caustic, concealed cores formerly crafted mainly by brutal, yet deceptive governments.

Call this verbal ‘cleansing’ “euphemistics”!

It begins in infancy. Parents are proscribed from using the word, NO. In its place is a host of long-winded, evasive substitutes. Of course, the first time any child hears that simple and beautiful word (always by accident) it immediately becomes branded in their brains as the most alluring, the chief, and perhaps the only word in their vocabulary.

Imagine entering the kitchen. Anywhere in the world but Manhattan or San Francisco you will be at least 10 feet from the stove. On the stove is a pot of boiling oil and your two-year old is about to tip it on her face. You involuntarily scream, “No!” You have just violated the first law of euphemistics. You have let your true feelings dictate your words. In your wanton outburst, demonstrating your brute animal nature, you have lost face. It is of minor concern that you may have saved your child’s face.

Johnny has an IQ of 47. Don’t dare say that he is retarded! You must say he is intellectually challenged.

There was a time that being challenged indicated an attempt at valor or glory, linked to the possibility of achieving some great accomplishment or triumph. Now, everyone knows that it indicates a person with limitations severe enough to prevent any accomplishment anyone considers worthy.

Johnny has been placed in *Special* Ed classes. Now answer honestly, are those the classes you would aspire to be in as a student? Isn’t special supposed to mean something distinctively good?

Johnny walks with a severe limp. He is called alternately abled. What would you call him to yourself when no PC policeman is lurking nearby?

Johnny has exaggerated feminine mannerisms that draw immediate involuntary attention from almost everyone even if we are not allowed to turn and stare. In a prior epoch several disparaging terms were universally applied to people with such conspicuously anomalous behavior. Now, these terms are proscribed. We are only permitted to say, “Johnny is gay” even if he is severely depressed. By the way, when was the last time that you heard any heterosexual person say, “I’m as trite and gay as a daisy in May”? If you are heterosexual I dare you to say that in public some time! Don’t censor yourself! What are you afraid of? Confess it at least to yourself!

I have been so politically incorrect that a week ago I was amazed to find that I had actually been invited to a dinner party. The host asked me what I thought of the entrée – broccoli, cauliflower and kale sautéed in a coconut-peanut butter sauce, garnished with carob-coated edamame. In an attempt to euphemize my vocabulary the best I could come up with was, “I am challenged to imagine such a macrobiotic veggie special.” What I really was challenged to imagine was a more odious dish. Why didn’t I say that I would hate it? I didn’t say it because, “Hate is a bad word.”

I secretly dared think that hate is not a bad word, but a fitting, strong word for intense, bad feelings. Are we to be denied having bad feelings or if we are allowed them, must they be merely wishy-washy?

I scarcely know any longer how to speak. I harbor the great fear that today’s mandated term is tomorrow’s forbidden one. I find myself labeled a racist at every turn. When I finally learned the word, Negro, I was told to say, Black. I practiced that in private for a while to be sure I got it right. By the time I had enough confidence to try it in public I was severely chastised with, “How insensitive! Say African American!” I then tried that on a person from Nigeria by mistake and was excoriated. Finally, I learned “Person of Color,” trembling lest by accident I slip and say the taboo term, “Colored Person.”

And, since I don’t fit the typical definition of “Person of Color”, does that make me colorless? Although no one has white skin, technically, white is the sum of all colors while black is the absence of color or light. Hence a white person is a person of the most color. Then again, we are told to talk euphemistics, not truth.

I also no longer have Oriental friends. They have all become “Asian”. But when I called my friends from India, Pakistan, Iran, and Siberia Asians I was chided again. By the way, oriental means east. One hundred and fifty years ago it was applied to people from what we now call the Middle East. At some point the term migrated to East Asia and now it has finally sunk in the Pacific. When I asked who was first to be offended by the term, Oriental, no one was able to tell me. But now that people have been told to be offended by it they are. Being offended makes us feel so grand.

Recently I ran into a man who said he is Bipolar. I congratulated him as being in one of a select group of adventurers who has been to both the Arctic and Antarctic. Imagine my surprise to find that the term has nothing to do with geography. It is barely acceptable to whisper what it used to be called.

Let me pose a few serious questions to which I would like honest answers. So, keep your answers private. Privacy is the best guarantee that our answers are honest to ourselves.

Were you surprised at the real meanings of these or similar euphemisms the first time you heard them? Do you think that a euphemism changes the meaning of what you are trying to describe? Do you think euphemisms improve attitudes and kindness, and if so, how much? Do you think euphemisms make anyone for whom they are intended feel better about themselves? Do you agree that the connotation of a euphemism will gradually sink to its real meaning and in its turn

have to be abandoned for ever more evasive and misleading jargon (or perhaps the prior politically incorrect term once it has been forgotten)? Finally, don't you think that needing such constant caution in our speech has its own cost?

Surely, one important early and good motive for creating euphemisms was to replace the nasty use of derogatory terms that were so common they required the ancient "wise" but patently false aphorism, "Sticks and stones will break my bones but words will never hurt me." But in far too many cases, our euphemisms are devious, deceptive and downright dishonest. The best rule is, don't be mean or insensitive but don't be afraid to use accurate terms in their proper place. That is called freedom of speech.

But too many purveyors of euphemistics don't want free speech. What they yearn to do is catch an elitist (one of the few permitted dysphemisms along with racist and sexist) failing to use the accepted euphemism, so that they may censor, censure, and feel sanctimonious, which are their true motives.

I wonder. What is the current euphemism for such people? In the old days we would have called them, oh, I dare not say.