Why Use Politically Correct Language?

Introduction

Political Correctness (PC) is an unofficial movement that rose to prominence in the 1980s and early ‘90s. Its aim is to promote equality in society and reduce discrimination towards people belonging to different groups. Among its various activities that aim to influence society and government, one of its strategies is to make taboo forms of language that potentially cause offence among – generally speaking – minority groups, on the grounds of:

- ability
- age
- appearance
- gender
- race
- religion
- status
- sexuality
- other reasons

In short, politically correct language means words and phrases that we use, instead of potentially derogatory or insulting language, to talk about something negative without causing offence. It is connected with euphemism, which can be defined as:

“A euphemism is a word or phrase that replaces part of a sentence which is considered offensive or taboo – i.e. that cannot be talked about in “polite” conversation.”

Example: John is Ellen’s boyfriend, but she introduces him to her parents as “A close friend”, because she doesn’t want them to know how serious their relationship is.

There are two kinds of politically correct language:

1. **Extreme Politically Correct Language**: phrases that we don’t use very often in everyday life, because they seem too extreme or sound silly
   - e.g. “My little Billy isn’t fat, he’s just big-boned.”
   
   Aim: to try to see something positive in something negative. But taken to extremes political correctness can become a bit of a joke in itself.

2. **Everyday Politically Correct Language**: phrases that we do need to use in everyday life, to avoid offending or stigmatising other people, especially people who belong to minority groups.
   - e.g. “We’re planning a special lunch for senior citizens next week.” [not old people]
   
   More respectful or neutral phrases replace blunter, more potentially insensitive or offensive language. For example, politicians are keen to use inclusive PC language in order to appeal to the greatest number of voters. Another example of required politically correct language is the use of gender-neutral terms, e.g. “police officer” instead of “policeman”, to reflect changes in our workforce and culture.

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1. Extreme Politically Correct Language

Let’s imagine two different situations:

Situation 1

You start a new job in a large office. The person showing you round describes some of the members of staff using the following politically correct language. Match each PC phrase with one of the franker meanings:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>a) deaf</th>
<th>b) ugly</th>
<th>c) drunk</th>
<th>d) old</th>
<th>e) fat</th>
<th>f) ignorant</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>

1. Paul isn’t __________, he’s just rather **factually unencumbered**.
2. Jean over there isn’t __________, she’s just **horizontally enabled**.
3. As you can see, Brioney is __________, but we prefer to say **aurally inconvenienced**.
4. Tina is almost sixty-six, but we don’t call her __________; rather **chronologically gifted**.
5. Tommy works hard but has the tendency to get __________ – or as we like to put it, **overserved** – every now and again.
6. One might devise some cruel nicknames for Maggie, but I prefer to think of her as **visually challenging**, and not __________.

Situation 2

Your job doesn’t work out and after about six months you begin a new job at a furniture store. The person showing you round describes a few of the people who work there using the following quite direct and insensitive language. You are so used to PC language by now that you try to correct your new colleague, using one of the following PC phrases in each case:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>a) terminally inconvenienced</th>
<th>b) an individual with temporarily unmet objectives</th>
<th>c) residentially flexible</th>
<th>d) motivationally deficient</th>
<th>e) potentially good</th>
<th>f) involuntarily leisured</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>

1. When you say that Jonathan is **lazy**, do you mean __________?
2. I prefer to think of your former colleague, Mr. Hoskins, as __________, rather than **dead**.
3. Instead of labelling your boss a **failure**, you should say that he’s __________.
4. I’m sorry, but calling that person who asked you for change a **bum** isn’t very kind. Could you perhaps refer to him as __________ instead?
5. I believe that instead of considering Larry **pure evil**, we should think of him as __________.
6. No, I wasn’t **unemployed** for two months. I was simply __________.

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Why Use Politically Correct Language?

Here is a selection of politically correct phrases that we don’t use very often, apart from to make jokes and perhaps poke fun at the politically correct movement – and to provide examples of “political correctness gone mad!” – i.e. when the politically correct movement goes against general common sense:

**ABILITY**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Blunt / Frank / Direct Language:</th>
<th>PC Phrases that are Too Extreme:</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>blind</td>
<td>visually challenged</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>deaf</td>
<td>visually orientated</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>deaf</td>
<td>aurally inconvenient</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ignorant</td>
<td>factually unencumbered</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>stupid</td>
<td>differently wise</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>incompetent</td>
<td>differently qualified</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>insane person</td>
<td>mental explorer</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>crazy/nuts</td>
<td>emotionally different</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>drunk</td>
<td>over-served</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**AGE**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Blunt / Frank / Direct Language:</th>
<th>PC Phrases that are Too Extreme:</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>old</td>
<td>chronologically gifted</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>old</td>
<td>chronologically challenged</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>old</td>
<td>experientially enhanced</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>false teeth</td>
<td>alternative dentition</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**APPEARANCE**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Blunt / Frank / Direct Language:</th>
<th>PC Phrases that are Too Extreme:</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>fat</td>
<td>differently sized</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>fat</td>
<td>horizontally enabled</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>fat person/fatty</td>
<td>person of substance</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>fat person/fatty</td>
<td>person with an alternative body image</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ugly</td>
<td>cosmetically different</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ugly</td>
<td>facially challenged</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ugly</td>
<td>visually challenging</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>bald</td>
<td>hair disadvantaged</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>bald</td>
<td>follically challenged</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>short</td>
<td>vertically challenged</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>large nosed</td>
<td>nasally gifted</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**CRIME**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Blunt / Frank / Direct Language:</th>
<th>PC Phrases that are Too Extreme:</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>criminal</td>
<td>morally challenged</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>criminal</td>
<td>behaviourally challenged</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>prisoner</td>
<td>resident at Her Majesty's pleasure</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**DEATH**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Blunt / Frank / Direct Language:</th>
<th>PC Phrases that are Too Extreme:</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>dead</td>
<td>metabolically challenged</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>dead</td>
<td>biologically challenged</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

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### Why Use Politically Correct Language?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Failure</th>
<th>Blunt / Frank / Direct Language:</th>
<th>PC Phrases that are Too Extreme:</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>to fail</td>
<td>to achieve a deficiency</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>failure</td>
<td>deferred success</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>a failure (thing)</td>
<td>an incomplete success</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>a failure (person)</td>
<td>an individual with temporarily unmet objectives</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>wrong</td>
<td>differently logical</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>mistake</td>
<td>inoperable statement/event</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Gender</th>
<th>Blunt / Frank / Direct Language:</th>
<th>PC Phrases that are Too Extreme:</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>housewife</td>
<td>domestic engineer/artist</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Manchester</td>
<td>Personchester</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Homelessness</th>
<th>Blunt / Frank / Direct Language:</th>
<th>PC Phrases that are Too Extreme:</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>homeless (adj)</td>
<td>involuntarily undomiciled</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>homelessness</td>
<td>mortgage-free living</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>homeless person/bum</td>
<td>involuntarily domiciled</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>homeless person/bum</td>
<td>outdoor urban dweller</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>homeless person/bum</td>
<td>residentially flexible</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Personality</th>
<th>Blunt / Frank / Direct Language:</th>
<th>PC Phrases that are Too Extreme:</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>liar</td>
<td>differently honest</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>clumsy</td>
<td>uniquely coordinated</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>lazy</td>
<td>motivationally deficient</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>boring</td>
<td>differently interesting</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>evil</td>
<td>morally different</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>evil</td>
<td>potentially good</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Race</th>
<th>Blunt / Frank / Direct Language:</th>
<th>PC Phrases that are Too Extreme:</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>baa baa black sheep…</td>
<td>baa baa green sheep…</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(children’s nursery rhyme)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Status</th>
<th>Blunt / Frank / Direct Language:</th>
<th>PC Phrases that are Too Extreme:</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>geek/nerd</td>
<td>socially challenged</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ghetto</td>
<td>ethnically homogenous area</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Unemployment</th>
<th>Blunt / Frank / Direct Language:</th>
<th>PC Phrases that are Too Extreme:</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>redundancy</td>
<td>career change opportunity</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>unemployed</td>
<td>indefinitely idled</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>unemployed</td>
<td>involuntarily leisured</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

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Why Use Politically Correct Language?

unemployed engaged in an orderly transition between career changes

2. Everyday Politically Correct Language

Here is a selection of common politically correct phrases that we have accepted into our everyday vocabulary, and that we use to replace language that might cause offence or even incite hatred towards other people, especially members of minority groups:

ABILITY

Don’t say: Say instead:
handicapped people/the disabled disabled people/differently abled people
disability ability
educationally subnormal/simple/disability person with learning difficulties or special needs
stupid/dumb

the mentally handicapped/
retarded person/crazy guy/
madman deaf hearing impaired
blind sight impaired
half blind partially sighted
midgets/dwarves little people
gifted child advanced learner

AGE

Don’t say: Say instead:
old person senior citizen
child/kid young person

APPEARANCE

Don’t say: Say instead:
fat/obese overweight/big/has puppy fat

GENDER

Don’t say: Say instead:
girls (about women) women
Miss/Mrs Ms
the little woman/the wife/er indoors/ the old ball and chain my wife/life partner
housewife homemaker
policeman police officer
postman postal worker
steward/-ess flight attendant
manageress/actress manager/actor
barmaid/-man bar attendant
fireman fire-fighter
chairman chair
mankind humankind

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manhole
hole in the ground

manpower
labour/human resources

right-hand man
chief assistant

RACE

Don’t say: Say instead:
American Indians Native Americans
Canadian Indians First Nation People
blacks/coloureds African Americans/black people/person of colour/ethnic minorities
Aborigines Aboriginal Australians/Australian Aboriginal person
white Caucasian
half-caste mixed race
blacklisted banned
black sheep of the family outsider, pariah

SEXUALITY

Don’t say: Say instead:
gays gay people
sex change gender reassignment
promiscuous sexually active

STATUS

Don’t say: Say instead:
drug addict person with a chemical dependency/person in recovery
tramp/bum homeless person
trailer park mobile home community
broken home dysfunctional family

OTHER NEGATIVE THINGS

Don’t say: Say instead:
used/second-hand recycled
worst least best
mistake learning experience
to lie to be creative with the truth/with the facts
politically correct culturally sensitive

Further Study:

• Consider politically correct language and behaviour in your culture. How politically correct are you/is your school or workplace?

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Talk a Lot

Intermediate Book 1

Why Use Politically Correct Language?

• Examine the language in “extreme” politically correct phrases, and try to build your own:

A typical “extreme” PC phrase consists of:

• an adverb of viewpoint (often an “-al” adjective + “-ly” suffix, e.g. emotional + ly = emotionally) related to the thing that you want to describe, such as:

  academically
  alphabetically
  aurally
  behaviourally
  biologically
  chronologically
  cosmetically
  differently
  ecologically
  economically
  emotionally
  environmentally
  ethnically
  experientially
  facially
  factually
  follically
  geographically
  historically
  ideologically
  indefinitely
  involuntarily
  mathematically
  metabolically
  morally
  motivationally
  musically
  nasally
  nautically
  politically
  psychologically
  racially
  residually
  socially
  statistically
  technically
  technologically
  terminally
  vertically
  visually

  etc.

  • …with an adjective, such as:

  education
  alphabet/language
  hearing
  behaviour/actions
  biology/body/metabolism
  time
  face/appearance
  being different
  the environment
  money
  emotions/feelings
  the environment
  ethnicity/race
  experience/age
  face
  facts/information/knowledge
  hair
  geography/places
  history
  ideologies
  lasting for a long time or forever
  something not being your choice
  mathematics/numbers
  body/metabolism
  morality/behaviour/actions
  motivation level/behaviour
  music/rhythm
  nose
  boats/the sea/the ocean
  politics/power
  the mind/the brain/psychology
  race
  housing
  society/other people
  statistics/facts
  technical things
  technology/computers/gadgets
  death/the end
  height
  sight

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challenged
disadvantaged
disabled
embarrassed
inconvenienced
unencumbered
unfocused
untalented

enabled
enabled
flexible
gifted
improvement
interesting
orientated
qualified

etc.

Examples of new politically correct phrases, using some of the words listed above:

• Somebody who is afraid of travelling by boat could be called 
  nautically challenged.

• Somebody who is lost could be said to be 
  geographically unfocused.

  etc.

Answers:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Situation 1</th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>1. f)</td>
<td>2. e)</td>
<td>3. a)</td>
<td>4. d)</td>
<td>5. c)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Situation 2</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>1. d)</td>
<td>2. a)</td>
<td>3. b)</td>
<td>4. c)</td>
<td>5. e)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

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