

## Political Correctness

The English language is full of contempt for women. It's not only that there are so many words that denote women of loose sexual morals (*hussy*, *harlot*, and more recently *slut*, *tramp*, *broad*, and more recently still *slag* or *slapper*), or women who are malicious, bad-tempered or empty-headed (*shrew*, *scold*, and more recently *bimbo*) – it is difficult to keep such a list up to date, since these terms change so quickly. Things are much worse when we look at the history of such words. *Hussy* originally just meant 'housewife'; *harlot* was originally applied to men, then extended to apply to women, and now refers only to women; *tramp* still has as its main meaning 'a person with no fixed home' but was extended in the twentieth century to mean a sexually promiscuous woman; *broad*, from referring simply to a woman, took on the meaning of a sexually loose woman. The story is much the same with the second group, the words that denote bad-tempered women: *shrew* was originally applied to men, then to women as well, then only to women; *scold* comes, strangely enough, from a Scandinavian word for a poet, then probably was applied to poets who made fun of their subjects, and finally developed its modern meaning – the noun applying mainly to women; *bimbo* originally just meant 'baby' (no doubt from the Italian *bambino*), and now means a pretty but empty-headed woman.

What does this history tell us? First, it reminds us that our language is constantly changing, so that a discussion of political correctness needs to deal with both the past and the present. Indeed, they cannot really be separated, because most of the words from the past are still with us: language consists of the past that has accumulated, as well as the latest additions. Then, when we look at the history, it

tells us that terms expressing contempt which originally applied to men and women often come to be applied to women only; and further, that terms which simply denote 'women' come to mean 'sexually loose women'. History, as often, tells us something important: it shows the direction in which the language has changed. And as far as women are concerned, that direction is downwards.

Contempt for women is not, of course, the only kind of bias in our language. There's a good deal of racist contempt, too, and often the racist insults are even more abusive, just as racist violence has often been more savage than sexist violence. (Of course there's been plenty of violence against women, but it has usually been against individual women, whereas racist violence has often taken the form of riots, pogroms and lynchings.) When we compare racist insults with sexist insults one striking difference emerges: that women are usually insulted by being placed in a sub-group that is clearly disapproved of (usually prostitutes), whereas black, Asian, Jewish and sometimes Mediterranean people are insulted simply for belonging to that racial group (*nigger*, *wop*, *jid*). Racist contempt is often indiscriminating, as we can see from what is probably the commonest of racist terms, *wog*. No one is sure of its origin, but one theory is that it's an abbreviation of *golliwog*, a soft fabric doll with a black face, popular in the early twentieth century. It is impossible to attach any precise meaning to *wog*, since it seems to have been used to denote any racial group except Northern Europeans. We can see its looseness of meaning from the British saying *Wogs begin at Calais*; indeed, looseness of meaning is probably central to racist contempt. The racist is not interested in what group his victims belongs to, he simply wants to make the point that they're not part of his own group.

And what can we do about all this hatred and contempt? The old answer was that we can do nothing: words are just words, and we have no power over them. But here we once again encounter the contrast between description and prescription, the prescribers now being a very different group from the Fowlers and their followers who believe the language is going to the dogs. Now it is the feminists and other reformers, looking towards the future not the past, who tell us to watch our language, to be careful what we say (or write) when there is a danger that our choice of words could give offence, or reinforce undesirable stereotypes. So it is now time for us to take a

deep breath and confront the issue of political correctness.

And immediately we find ourselves in the midst of argument, for even the expression I have used as the title of this chapter is controversial. It is not difficult to define *political correctness* in a more or less neutral way as, say, the avoidance of terms that denigrate disadvantaged groups; but the term is not usually neutral. It is most likely to be used by the politically incorrect, to whom it conveys the idea that they are being asked to conform to fashion. Fashion? That too is a loaded term. People are happy to be thought fashionable when it comes to dress, but for one's use of language to be described as fashionable suggests that it is irrational and won't last long; so we are much more likely to hear people boasting that their language is unfashionable than that it is fashionable. We are not going to be able, in this area, to avoid controversy.

For the ardent feminist, or other keen reformer, and the indignant reactionary do not disagree only about politics; they also disagree about usage. Reading a provocative piece of writing, we can correct its spelling and its punctuation without fear of argument, but to try and correct its usage is likely to lead to as fierce a discussion as its content would. In this section I shall be as objective as I can, but there is no doubt that what I say will arouse some disagreement.

The movement for politically correct language began with gender, and that remains the most important area, for two reasons. For most people, sexual politics is more important than racial politics. It is possible (depending of course on where one lives and who one mixes with) to avoid much contact with people of another race; but it is obviously impossible not to encounter the other sex. And as well as this, gender, as we shall now see, lies at the heart of language. English has freed itself from the gender distinctions that other European languages have retained: in French the sun is masculine and the moon feminine, in German it's the other way round. We don't need to worry our heads about such differences: for us sun and moon are both *it*. But though we may have shed grammatical gender, we still have plenty of other ways in which gender impinges on language. So we'll begin with that.

From all directions nowadays we are urged to avoid sexist language: not to say *he* when we mean 'he or she'; not to refer to the *chairman* of a meeting, who might be female; not to refer to Charles

Dickens as *Dickens* but Jane Austen as *Jane* – the list of examples is endless. Many organisations – firms, trade unions, government offices – now issue guidelines to their members, telling them what terms they should avoid, and (usually, not always) what these should be replaced by. We'll look at one such set of guidelines later in the chapter. Let us start with the commonest example, and the one that arouses the most indignation: the use of *man*. This can mean 'man, not animal' or it can mean 'man, not woman', and therein lies the problem. Darwin's book *The Descent of Man* appeared in 1871, and *The Expression of the Emotions in Man and Animals* in 1872; they aroused plenty of indignation, but no one thought of objecting to their titles. Today his use of *man* might get him into as much trouble as his theories did then.

*Man* is a good example to begin with, since it enables us to take a glance at other languages. English is not the only language in the world, though sometimes the reformers seem to assume that it is. Latin, for example, has two words for man: *homo*, which means 'not animal', and *vir*, which means 'not woman' (though it must be confessed that the usage is not always consistent). But German is consistent: *Mensch* ('not animal') is kept distinct from *Mann* ('not woman'), and so German women do not feel excluded by it.

The sexist use of *man*, then, is not found in every language. Does this matter? Well, it depends on what the reform campaign is saying. If it is claiming that sexist usage contributes to or reinforces sexist oppression, then we need to ask whether Roman society was, or German society is, less patriarchal than ours – and the answer to this is certainly 'No'. Of course it is always possible to claim that the linguistic activity itself is seen as oppressive, even if it is not evidence for other oppression, and in that case we come off worse than the Germans; but this is rather a weak claim. Women would probably not bother to object to sexist terminology if they had not suffered from other, more serious, forms of oppression.

I feel fairly confident that this is true, because of the case of left-handed people. Our language has almost as much prejudice against the left-handed as it has against women. A *dextrous* person is being complimented for their manual skills, a *sinister* person is mistrusted; but originally the two words simply meant 'right-handed' and 'left-handed'. If you are *gauche* you are clumsy (socially more often than

physically), but the word simply means 'left'. And of course *right* is perhaps our most inclusive term of approval: answers, conduct, actions, opinions, and thinking can all be right. Yet despite all this unfairness in the language, left-handers have not found it necessary to complain, and do not ask us to watch our language when using these terms. Surely the reason must be that they are not kept under politically or discriminated against socially to anything like the same extent as women have been, so this prejudice in the language is not seen as part of a wider oppression. Being only linguistic, it does not upset them.

Back, then, to the use of *man*. Avoid using it unless you are referring specifically to males – that is the recommendation of those wishing to remove gender-bias from the language, and it seems a good policy for English speakers. But nothing is quite simple in language, and there are two difficulties that we ought not to ignore. One is how we deal with the past (this is discussed on page 194). The other is that *man* is such a pervasive term in English: the number of occasions when it crops up in idioms and compound words is astonishing. We *man a stall*, and we *man the barricades*; criminals commit *manslaughter*; artists have a *one-man show*; to finish the job on time the firm needs more *manpower*; a barrier can be natural or *man-made* – the word is everywhere.

This makes the task of avoiding it daunting, but not impossible: it means that we must be vigilant when using the language. Using language is always a mixture of habit and vigilance; most of our words come to us almost automatically, but some require careful thought. And of course the more formal the occasion, the more careful the thought needs to be. To the feminist it will seem no bad thing that speakers should pause to take thought in order to use gender-free language; it can be welcomed as compensation for many centuries of unthinking male dominance. But it will of course mean that not all speakers will come up with the same solutions; and some cases will be easier than others. It is quite easy to turn the *one-man* of *one-man show* into *solo*, or else to say *one-man* or *one-woman* as appropriate; it is quite easy to *mount* or *defend* the barricades, to *run*, to *look after* or to *manage* a stall (*manage* has nothing to do with *man*, but comes from the Latin word for 'hand'); it is usually easy to replace *manpower* with *labour* or *workers* or *staff*. When the Anglican church

modernised its marriage service, the priest no longer declared the couple to be *man and wife* but *husband and wife*; the couple can still, if they wish, be married with the old form of words (in which the wife also promises to 'obey') but hardly any choose to do this.

What of *chairman*? One favourite among the politically correct reforms is replacing this with *chairperson*, but it has been found that it is usually a woman who is called the *chairperson*; a man is still called the *chairman*. For this reason, *chair* seems to me a better solution. Indeed, my preference (you may not agree) is to avoid *person* altogether; the word has now got itself a reputation as coming from the unthinking and unsubtle feminist, ignoring linguistic sensitivity in the interests of the crusade, and it usually alienates potential allies. I have even heard the expression *to person the stall* – and the sniggers it aroused certainly did the campaign for equality no good.

The use of *chair* instead of *chairperson* is, however, a kind of solution not available to us in the case of *layman*. This originally meant someone who was not a priest or clergyman, but has also come to mean someone who is not an expert (not a lawyer or a scientist, for instance). Here the choice is simply between continuing to say *layman* and announcing one's political correctness by saying *layperson*. If one chooses the latter, my preference would be to write it as two words (*lay* is then an adjective, and this form is probably less offensive to the diehard).

*Manslaughter* is trickier. It is a technical term in law, and non-lawyers can hardly alter it without causing confusion. There is an alternative available – *homicide* – but that could not enter legal terminology without the agreement of the profession.

There are also some difficulties that are more narrowly linguistic. For instance, the uses of *man* which it would be most awkward to get rid of are those where it comes in the middle of a word: we praise a politician for *statesmanship*, a tennis player for *sportsmanship*, an artist for *craftsmanship*. Most hearers probably do not even notice the *-man-* in the middle of these words. There are no readily available synonyms for them, in any case; and it would be a pity to lose these words from the language.

Though the use of *man* may be the best-known example of sexist language, it is of course not the only one. There is, for instance, the use of feminine suffixes: *poetess*, *actress*, *manageress*. Many women

feel the feminine suffix to be a put-down, implying that poets, actors and managers are the real thing, while poetesses, actresses and manageresses are an attempt by women to imitate it. So there is a case for dropping the suffix – in English at any rate. Once again we can notice the contrast with German, where the feminine suffix *-in* (*Schauspielerin*, *Verwalterin*) is normal, indeed universal, and not felt to be demeaning. Indeed, there are advantages in always using a different term for the female version, as we can see when we look at those English examples where it is always retained: *princess*, for instance, or *countess*. It would seem a rather clumsy joke to refer to Prince Charles and Prince Anne. What this shows us is that language has random humps of obstinacy – words that seem so odd when politically corrected that there is virtually no chance of their being changed.

The case of *priestess* is interesting. Its commonest use is for the priestess of Apollo, the woman who went into a trance and delivered the words of the oracle at Delphi. If it has other uses, these are almost certainly for non-Christian religions. Of course this is partly because Christian priests (including Protestant ministers) have always been male. Now that several of the Protestant churches ordain women, there seems to be no tendency to give them a female suffix. Again there is a linguistic complication here: *priest* is usually reserved for Roman Catholic priests (though it is used by High Anglicans as well), and there is no sign of women being ordained in the Roman Catholic church. If they ever are, it will be interesting to see if they are called *priests* or *priestesses*.

### **Pronouns**

Next, pronouns. Along with the use of *man*, this is the commonest issue raised in language reform. *Everyone is entitled to his opinion*, we used to say; if it was objected that *everyone* includes women, this was met with the reply that in English usage the male embraces the female. No one is likely to make that joke today. Half the world's population is female, so everyone is entitled to the opinion that we should not pretend otherwise, even in English usage. So what do we say instead of *his* opinion?

This turns out to be awkward. Should we say *Everyone is entitled to their opinion?* *to her opinion?* *to his or her opinion?* How at this

point we might envy the French, for whom the words for *his* and *her* are the same! Or let us take another sentence: *Everyone is inclined to think too highly of himself*. In that case it is tempting to be mischievous and suggest that this sentence can stay as it is, since it's usually men who have too high an opinion of themselves. But mischief won't solve our grammatical problem, so once again we are faced with the choice between *himself*, *themselves*, *herself*, or *him-* or *herself*.

Whichever solution we choose, there will be objections to it. Let's begin with the plural: *Everyone is entitled to their opinion*; *everyone is inclined to think too highly of themselves*. This frees us from the need to choose between masculine and feminine, and so is often recommended by language reformers; and there is also an argument, which is interesting ideologically, in favour of using the plural. Do we say *woman's writing* or *women's writing*, *woman's art* or *women's art*, *woman's psychological make-up* or *women's psychological make-up*? There has been a shift, among the politically sensitive, from singular to plural here. *Woman's writing* suggests the kind of writing appropriate to womankind, while *women's writing* suggests what women have actually written. The singular has a generalising, even idealising effect, so that the speaker who feels hostile to stereotyping, and is aware that women do not all write in the same way, is likely to prefer the plural.

But there are objections to using the plural. One that you will quite often hear (perhaps from the same people who object to *hopefully* as a sentence adverb) is that *everyone*, since it contains the word *one*, is obviously a singular, so we should not of course allow ourselves to slip into the plural. I have a sneaking sympathy with this objection, since it encourages us to be aware of the make-up of the words we use; but logic alone seldom wins a battle against usage. A more serious objection is that quite often the sentence is not about the plural but about the singular, and might even be emphasising the singular: *Every single one of them must make up their own mind* sounds decidedly odd to my ear. On occasion, using the plural can even be misleading. Here is a piece of good advice offered by a marriage guidance counsellor: *If you and your partner are having difficulties, tell them about your worries*. Who does *them* refer to? It sounds as if the partners are being urged to get outside counselling, that *them* refers to the members of the counselling service the troubled



couple should turn to. No doubt that could on occasion be wise, but it is not what is intended in this case: the partners are actually being urged to talk to each other. So do we not need a singular here?

Here is an eccentric suggestion that would solve the problem of *themselves*, but not, unfortunately, the problem of *them*: we should say *Everyone has to choose for themselves, or is inclined to think too highly of themselves*. After all, if we want to give the word a singular meaning, why not give it a singular form – and *themselves* was a normal English word until the fifteenth century. I have never heard anybody say it, but I would be delighted if the word was reborn.

So much for using the plural pronoun; let's turn to the next possibility. Here is a remark about what scientists do: *A scientist can study the behaviour of objects under certain conditions. She can describe what happens and offer explanations without paying any attention to ordinary people's ideas*. This was written by the American academic Jonathan Culler, who chose to replace the usual *he* not with *they* but with *she*. The result is a sentence which most people will read with a slight shock of surprise: the majority of scientists, surely, are still men, so why use the feminine? The answer, of course, is that producing this shock was precisely the author's intention. Since *he* is the usual way of being inaccurate, Culler chose the opposite in order to make the reader think. Making the reader think is, surely, a benefit to be seized on – though it means of course that he(!) will start thinking about sexist language instead of the actual topic, in this case the relation of science to common sense. There is a price to pay for everything.

There is also a milder and rather ingenious form of this strategy, which suggests that if a man is writing he should continue to use *he*, whereas a woman writing should use *she*. This, in a way, is an even more attractive solution, but it would of course mean that only women could strike a verbal blow for equality.

So we have *they*, and we have *she*; the next possibility, which is widely used, is *he or she*. This is undoubtedly the fairest and most truthful alternative, and there is nothing to be said against it except its clumsiness. But who can doubt that it is clumsy? And if Culler's paragraph continued *He or she is responsible only to the truth, and ordinary people have no reason to object to his or her explanations ...*, we would soon grow irritated with the verbosity. If it caught on, we

would probably learn to live with the clumsiness, even, after a while, to stop noticing it; but until that happened I would probably not be the only one to feel uncomfortable at what was happening to our beautiful language.

I can predict with some confidence that this problem will eventually solve itself, as one usage becomes established and so begins to seem natural to us. When that happens, any awkwardness or illogicality we now find in that usage will melt away, and it will become Standard English. What I cannot predict is which will be the winning form.

### **Avoiding Offence**

Now we need to draw a distinction. The movement for political correctness in language has more than one aim. Our discussion of the use of *man* and of pronouns was concerned with what we can call gender-bias: the assumption built into the language that it is only really necessary to talk about men. I began the chapter, however, by pointing out that there is also a good deal of contempt for women built into the language. This is not the same thing as gender-bias, though the two are obviously connected: we are likely to despise those we ignore, and ignore those we despise.

So let us turn now from ignoring to despising. Here the aim of politically correct language (or ‘verbal hygiene’, as Deborah Cameron prefers to call it in her book of the same name) is, not to bring the forgotten into the light, but to avoid giving offence – to urge us not to use language to demean or insult. As a moral aim this seems wholly admirable, and our first reaction to it might be wholehearted approval. But if one approves of the injunction, is one concerned with language? Could we not simply say ‘Do not demean or insult’? This question is certainly worth asking, and the reply of the defender of verbal hygiene might be that racist or sexist language does more than just insult someone, it insults him or her in a peculiarly insidious way, by suggesting that his or her offence is to belong to a particular group. If you insult someone by saying *you stink* or *you nasty little toad* or *you stupid reactionary*, or by calling them a *rat*, a *snake*, a *cow* or a *bitch*, you are just insulting that person, not placing him or her in a racial or sexual category and dragging the whole category down as well.

This seems to me a strong argument, and you may find it completely convincing. It is, however, the case that any common noun (*toad*, *reactionary*, *bitch*) describes a class, in this case of persons or animals, and when it is used as an insult the whole class is being dragged down. A staunch conservative might object to *reactionary* as a term of abuse, and an animal lover might protest indignantly that she loves toads or snakes. And if we look carefully at animal insults, we can notice a certain amount of imbalance between the sexes even there: to call a man a *bull* usually suggests that he is clumsy or hot-tempered, but does not express the same degree of contempt as calling a woman a *cow*. The fact that men are more often feared and women more often despised has left its trace in the language.

And now we have another difficulty, and one not easily disposed of. Who decides whether an expression is insulting? A once-famous cartoon showed two American men in what was probably a New York bar squaring up to each other with fists clenched; the caption ran 'Who are you calling an intellectual?' We should not underestimate the human capacity to feel insulted, to take offence at what to others seems harmless – or even, in this case, more of a compliment. If we felt it necessary to yield to anyone, or any group, who claimed to feel insulted by the wording we used, language would become a minefield.

Perhaps it already has – as in the question of how we refer to the handicapped. This is the third area (along with gender and race) which the movement for political correctness has concerned itself with, and because it is the most recent it is much discussed nowadays. We are sometimes told to avoid saying *the disabled* because it dehumanises people, and to refer to *disabled people* or *people suffering from a disability*; or not to say that someone is *a victim of arthritis* but *a person who has arthritis*; and even to avoid the word *handicap* because 'it carries connotations of *cap in hand*'. (These are all, of course, real examples.) The last is most easily dealt with. The origin of *handicap* is uncertain – and fascinating – but the most likely theory is that it comes from a form of gambling or contest in which the different parties put their stake in a cap (not 'cap in hand' but 'hand in cap'); there is no evidence that it has anything to do with begging or deference. Next, *victim*. There is not, I think, any objection to speaking of the *victims* of crime or of genocide, nor of the *victims* of

an earthquake or an epidemic; it seems to be only those who suffer from an incapacity or a disease who (sometimes) dislike the term. There is no doubt that the condition itself is unpleasant: everyone who has cerebral palsy or arthritis would rather not have it. Perhaps the objection to *victim* is to mentioning the unpleasant condition in relation to the person, as if that somehow taints them. In that case, it is an example of prudery – the belief that certain things are best not mentioned – and it is interesting that in a time when prudery is decreasing in relation to bodily functions and sex, it is increasing in relation to illness and disease.

As for *person who*, it seems to claim that using the definite article followed by an adjective is dehumanising. Is this true? Definite article plus adjective as a way of referring to groups of people is ordinary (and value-neutral) English usage, as we can see when we think of *the French* or *the Germans* – or indeed of *the gifted*, *the industrious*, *the smokers among you* – or *the men* and *the women*. Indeed, saying *the French* is recommended by some reformers as a good way of avoiding the sexism of *Frenchmen*. As for inserting *person* to show that you recognise the other as a human being, this seems to add to the reputation of *person* as a piece of reformer's clumsiness. Are socialists or Anglicans to become *persons who believe in socialism*, and *people who belong to the Anglican church* ...?

The intention behind these exhortations to mind our language is of course wholly praiseworthy: to treat others as fully human, and not to demean them. But that intention has to be set against another criterion, which is knowing what an expression means. Such knowledge derives from the language community as a whole, not from a group who choose to feel offended – or flattered – by a usage which is not normally considered to be emotionally charged. Indeed, since feelings are so strong, and language is so complex, those who feel strongly about a usage are very likely to get things wrong, supporting their well-intentioned protest by offering a generalisation about language that is incorrect. I have, for instance, read a discussion of sensitivity in language that defended the use of *gay* because (it claimed) *homosexual* is a derogatory term. A doctor I once had asked all his patients if they were heterosexual or homosexual; although some patients may have resented being asked, as an intrusion on their privacy, I would be very surprised if any of them objected to the terminology.

An interesting borderline case here is *bourgeois*. Society can be divided (by a rather simple analysis) into the three classes of *aristocracy*, *bourgeoisie* and *proletariat*. The *bourgeoisie* (literally 'those from the towns') are the 'middle class' – merchants, manufacturers and possibly professional people. It is quite possible to use the word as a term of dispassionate social analysis. But it is often used to refer not just to a social class but to their values and way of life, and can easily come to mean 'stuffy', 'self-satisfied' – even 'sanctimonious'. So if one remarked that the WEA (the Workers' Educational Association) ought now to be called the Bourgeois Educational Association, since most of the students are now middle-class housewives or retired professionals, this could be intended as a neutral observation with no element of praise or blame. But it could be received as an offensive remark – made worse perhaps by the fact that the word sounds foreign! *Homosexual*, *bourgeois*, *handicapped*, *victim*: terms of classification, or insults? If the listener is quite free to decide whether a word is offensive or not, which of us shall escape whipping?

Questions of usage are not, of course, confined to single words, so I turn now to an expression which you may (or may not?) find objectionable: *women and children first*. Deborah Cameron claims that this is sexist because 'it belongs to a patriarchal discourse in which men are there to "protect" women and children – the women and children being by implication men's property, men's to control.' Such thinking belongs, of course, to a tradition of chivalry that goes back centuries. The belief that women are there to be protected is no doubt preferable to the belief that they are there to be bullied and exploited, and to that extent the feminist might regard chivalry as an improvement on what went before – but still needing to be improved on. We can, however, ask whether the expression is to be taken literally or more loosely. Its literal application is, of course, to a shipwreck or similar situation in which it may not be possible to save everyone's life, and in that situation it seems not so much chivalrous as biologically useful, since the group will survive best if we first rescue those most capable of producing the next generation. Most of us in modern Britain, however, do not expect to find ourselves in such an extreme situation, and we may therefore feel that *women and children first* is less a practical policy in an emergency than a looser expression of chivalrous sentiment that now belongs to the past.

Here is an even more controversial example. J. Penelope, writing about a scene in a television film called *The Billionaire Boys Club*, objects to its use of *consciousness-raising*. A young man in the film uses the term to describe his emotion on seeing his first dead body. Here is Penelope's objection to this usage: 'For us,' she writes, 'consciousness-raising was a profound, mind-altering experience that impelled us to change our lives,' and she objects to the word being 'perverted' when used to describe 'a yuppie's shocked repulsion when he saw his first dead body.' Few of us, in our modern sanitised society, see dead bodies, and the shock of doing so (whether one is a rich young man or a poor old woman) may well be more deeply moving than Penelope seems to grant; but my concern here is not with the substance of what she is saying, but with her attempt to restrict a word (in this case *consciousness-raising*) to its original use. Suppose we compare it to the use of the word *conversion*. This was originally a religious term, referring to the turning of the sinner to God, or the turning of an unbeliever to a particular religion – its earliest use appears to have been for the conversion of Saint Paul. It later took on a wide range of other meanings, in logic, in mathematics and in astronomy, as well as the more recent meaning of any change of opinion (conversion to socialism, to capitalism, to democracy – even, perhaps jokingly, to a taste for wine or admiration for a film star). One can easily imagine a devout Christian objecting to this more frivolous use as a 'perversion' of what for them is an important concept, but they would have little chance of preventing it. Once a word has arrived, it belongs to the language, not to the group who first thought of using it.

Political correctness, as we have so far dealt with it, has a negative effect on language: it discourages certain usages. But it can also encourage other usages, as well as supporting actual changes in usage. A particularly interesting example is the replacement of *sex* by *gender*. The term *sex* (not in the sense 'sexual activity', but in the sense of the division into two sexes, male and female) belongs to biology. Now one of the hottest controversies which feminism has sparked off is that between biological and social explanations. Patriarchal authority, seeking to confine women within traditional 'feminine' roles, has always tended to support its arguments with appeals to biology. For instance, a contributor to the *Journal of the Anthropological Society* in 1869 claimed that 'there must be radical, natural

permanent distinctions in the mental and moral conformation, corresponding with those in the physical organisation of the sexes', and that women are therefore 'incapable of receiving a training similar to that of men.' This expressed a view that was widely held throughout the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, often by 'experts': the claim that too much study and intellectual activity would cause terrible physical damage to women. It was often put forward with all the authority of 'medical science'. It is understandable, then, that feminism has always tended to be suspicious of biological arguments, and has claimed that the traditional division into the roles of men and those of women is determined much more by society (and therefore changeable) and much less by biology (and therefore fixed). This battle is now more or less over, and has resulted in a victory for feminism: we now have female scientists, politicians and scholars in a way that was unimaginable two centuries ago, and it has not caused any of the terrible physical damage to women that 'medical science' predicted. Hence the preference today for sociological rather than biological explanations.

English vocabulary already possessed this important distinction: *male* and *female* are biological terms, *masculine* and *feminine* are social terms, *sex* is a biological concept, *gender* is a social concept. An enlightened feminist vocabulary could use (perhaps I should say 'could have used') this distinction to make us more conscious of what can and what can't be changed, by encouraging the use of *sex* when distinguishing 'male' from 'female' and *gender* when distinguishing 'masculine' from 'feminine'. But this has not happened. Most of us have filled in forms which asked whether our *gender* is *male* or *female*. An opportunity to mark a valuable distinction in everyday vocabulary has been lost, and in the new usage it is only animals, no longer humans, that are divided into two *sexes*. So the politically incorrect have yet another reform to complain of, and the new edition of Eric Partridge's *Usage and Abusage* places *gender* among the 'vogue words'.

### **Guidelines?**

To be fair to the reformers of language I clearly ought to let them speak for themselves, so I have chosen as an example the guidelines put out by the Canadian Linguistic Association, a distinguished

scholarly body from which we would expect reliable advice. Here are two of the guidelines from their website:

*Avoid gender stereotyped or demeaning characterizations; e.g. presenting men as actors and women as passive recipients of others' actions. Men are frequently the agents, women the recipients, of violent acts. We recommend that the portrayal of violent acts be avoided altogether regardless of the sex or species of the participants.*

*Avoid consistently putting reference to males before females. Not only does this order convey male precedence, in English and French it will put males in subject position and women in object position.*

I should say first that the guidelines include some good advice, such as to avoid using *he* or *man* 'except in unambiguous reference to males'; we have already discussed this. I should say too that I feel sympathetic to the anti-sexist aim of the guidelines as a whole. But what should we think of these two?

The first one seems to conclude with a recommendation that is not about language use at all, but about content; and seeing it standing naked as it does, I find it hard to know what it is saying. The exhortation to avoid *portrayal of violent acts* is defensible if rather old-fashioned if addressed to novelists, highly controversial if addressed to newspaper editors, and absurd if it concerns police reports.

The reasoning behind the second guideline is simply false, since it is quite easy to think up a sentence in which examples of an inferior category precede the superior ones: *There are a few good white footballers in the team, but none of them can match the brilliance of the all-black midfield group.* And it is not clear if *subject position* and *object position*, as used here, are grammatical or social terms; the grammatical subject need not be the one in a superior position (*The slaves were bullied by their masters*).

I can't resist quoting the oddest guideline of all, since its content is so interesting – and will probably seem tasteless to some readers. This is the one which reads: *Avoid sexist (or otherwise derogatory) content in examples (e.g. 'The man who beats his mistress will regret it sooner than the man who beats his wife' – slight revision of actual example).* I'd love to know what the actual example was before they



'revised' it – was it more or less sexist than their revision? Even more, I'd love to know whether the statement is true. The distinction between wife and mistress, like the term *mistress* itself, sounds rather old-fashioned now, but the sentence seems to be saying that it is in women's interest not to marry the man they are living with. If so, did the Linguistic Association object to the statement because it's true or because it isn't?

Why have I dwelt on this? Language is far more complicated and subtle than reformers, in their enthusiasm, always realise, so that the most well-meaning exhortations can be quite useless for reform purposes. Concern for the nature of language can be a cloak for male chauvinist prejudice; but it can also be quite genuine.

Why are verbal hygiene and political correctness resisted? It may be for political reasons, such as opposition to feminism or equality. This is not often explicit: there may be plenty of male chauvinists and racists in modern Britain, but they tend not to speak out in public, since their views are unfashionable, and widely disapproved of. So we are not often told directly that we should say *chairman* because the person presiding at a meeting ought to be a man, or *Everyone has a right to his own opinion* because it is right and natural to think of everyone with an opinion as male. The common reason for resisting these changes is that the proposed form is awkward, or inelegant. Finding a proposed form inelegant can no doubt be a way of avoiding the change itself, serving as a disguise for one's conservative opinions. I say this in the interests of honesty, since I have raised so many of the objections to proposed changes, and in the hope that I have not myself been guilty of the offence, either in what I have already written or in what follows.

That words have favourable or unfavourable connotations is of course unavoidable – words like *good*, *bad*, *nice* or *nasty* have little meaning except for their favourable or unfavourable connotations. For that reason they are unlikely to change much. But as our values and social attitudes change, the words that have a familiar meaning and also a favourable or unfavourable flavour are likely to reflect this change – but not in a straightforward way. As we can see if we compare what has happened to *aggressive* and to *dialogue*.

These two examples could have been discussed in 'On the Cusp of Change' in Chapter 3, but I have treated them here because these

changes show something of the complexity of our political attitudes, and how they are changing. The basic meaning of *aggressive*, 'likely to make the first attack, hostile', or (with unfavourable associations) 'discourteously hostile', has not changed. What is new is its use with favourable associations: an advertisement in the Situations Vacant column of a newspaper is now likely to say *We are looking for someone with an aggressive attitude to selling* (or *expansion*, or *competition*). Similarly the basic meaning of *dialogue* has not changed: 'a conversation of a more or less formal kind between two or more people'. Probably its most frequent use is as a literary term, as when we distinguish between the *dialogue* and the *narration* in a novel. In recent years, however, it has been used more and more in a political context, as when we hope for *meaningful dialogue* between hostile groups, or speak of *Marxist-Christian dialogue*, and this usage almost always has favourable connotations. It seems odd that both *aggressive* and *dialogue* should have taken on a favourable association, since the two terms are in a sense opposites: if two hostile parties are engaged in dialogue, does that not mean that they are being less aggressive?

In a capitalist society, economic activity involves competition, and firms need to be aggressive. In a world where countries are closely involved with one another, war becomes more dangerous, and bystanders feel an ever-increasing desire to see it avoided. It should not surprise us, therefore, that in the modern complex world our vocabulary encourages us to favour being aggressive in one area of social life, and discourages us in another.

The ever-closer involvement of countries with one another has led to the idea of the *global village*, and has affected (or *impacted?* or *impacted on?* – see page 38) our vocabulary. Take, for instance, *ethnic*. The original meaning of this was 'heathen', and it was used to denote nations which were not Christian or Jewish – often, of course, with disapproval. With the rise of anthropology, the study of cultures very different from our own, it became something of a technical term (*ethnology* is more or less the same thing as anthropology). Perhaps the most visible element in a foreign culture, certainly in a non-European culture, is dress. As global contact has led to remote cultures becoming more visible, and as we have become less *ethnocentric* (less convinced that our own tribal customs are superior to all others), people are now more likely to wear *ethnic costume* or *ethnic*

*jewellery*, to learn *ethnic dances*, even to cook *ethnic dishes*. Of course the clothes which the British wear every day, or everyday British customs, could be described by an Asian observer as *ethnically British*. But we are not very good at seeing ourselves as others see us, so to most people *ethnic* now means 'foreign' – in practice, 'very foreign', since ethnologists, until recently, studied only remote cultures. So whereas foreign food might have seemed distasteful to our grandparents, and African dances might have seemed barbarous to their parents, *ethnic cooking* and *ethnic dances* are now politically correct.

### Irony

Another complication now – and one that takes us to a central feature of language. We do not always say what we mean. *Very clever*, we say to someone when we think their joke has fallen flat, or was too laboured. *Oh thank you*, we say when we feel insulted. *Very generous*, we say when someone has given too small a tip, or made too small an offer. The term for this is, of course, *irony*, and those simple examples were all from the spoken language; if we heard them, we would have no difficulty in realising, from the tone of voice, that the speaker means the opposite of what they have said. Here is an equally simple written example: *I posted the letter on Monday and it didn't arrive till Saturday – isn't our postal service wonderful?* And here is one that is rather more complicated: *No doubt the Creationists will find some way of refuting the geological evidence.* This is not a Creationist speaking, is it? The phrases *no doubt* and *will find some way* seem clearly to indicate that an outsider (possibly a scientist) is here writing about Creationism, and writing sceptically. And incidentally, it is important in this sentence to realise that *refuting* is being correctly used – that is, to mean 'finding valid arguments to disprove', not simply 'rejecting'. If instead of *refuting* the writer had used *rejecting*, the statement would be less ironic and probably less effective; if it had been '*disposing* of the geological evidence', it would be a slightly different form of irony, since *disposing* of could here carry either meaning.

All these examples can be seen as ironic if we just look at them, or hear them. Very often, however, we need to know the context in order to recognise irony. Context can include tone of voice in a spoken utterance, and knowledge about the author, or what is said elsewhere

in the book, in the case of something written. Irony is sometimes very easy and sometimes very difficult to recognise.

An anthropologist, asked what an anthropologist is, replies *Oh, it's just a fashionable name for nosy parker*. (*Nosy parker*, now rather old-fashioned, is slang for someone who is inquisitive about things he ought to leave alone; it is said to derive from someone who spied on courting couples in the park.) By using the term here, and by adding the word *just*, the speaker suggests that anthropology is nothing more than vulgar curiosity pretending to be a science (*fashionable* adds a further touch of mockery). There is obviously some truth in this: anthropologists systematically study customs that are often regarded as private, such as courtship. If the sentence were spoken by an outsider, especially a rather cynical outsider, it might be meant straight, that is, without irony. But the speaker was herself an anthropologist, and it is difficult to believe that she can have been quite so cynical about her profession. We can safely assume that the remark is ironic, but how ironic? Is the speaker a passionate believer in her discipline, pretending to be dismissive, or using irony to express some of her own uncertainties? To answer this we'd have to know a good deal about the situation – and about the speaker. Spoken irony of this kind can be recognised, but will contain subtleties which it's difficult for the outsider to be sure about.

Irony is everywhere, and in tightly coherent groups it is impossible to eradicate. A friend of mine worked one summer in the local vegetable market and, describing the situation to me, he remarked that social intercourse there was based entirely on insults. I'm sure a lot of them were politically incorrect insults. This showed that the stall-keepers were relaxed in the way they spoke to one another, though it is not impossible that there were rivalries and tensions also being expressed. Any study of language and its uses must concern itself with irony; my reason for discussing it in this chapter is that its interaction with questions of political correctness can be tense and complicated. It is so easy to defend insults or politically incorrect remarks by claiming that they were 'just ironic' that we clearly need to ask ourselves how we recognise irony. Almost anything that can be said straight can also be said ironically, and many an ironic remark may be heard as straight. Let us look at a few examples.

African-Americans sometimes call one another *nigger*. Clearly

what they are doing is appropriating an offensive term and using it as a mark of solidarity among themselves. This strategy is not unknown among oppressed or insulted groups. The early followers of George Fox were contemptuously called *Quakers* after a magistrate mocked Fox for telling him to tremble at the name of the Lord; the name caught on, and after a while the Friends began to call themselves Quakers. As long as they were consciously copying what they realised was an insult, they were being ironic; but now, of course, it has become an accepted alternative name for the Society of Friends. Will the same happen to the word *nigger*? Will its ironic use as a term of comradeship among black Americans become more and more widespread until it begins to lose its irony and turns into a normal term? This seems unlikely, since the word would have to lose its offensive quality for this to happen; but very unlikely things have happened in language, and it is always rash to predict.

Now suppose it was a white man who called a black man a *nigger*. Traditionally this would of course be a simple example of racist language, but suppose the two men were friends and were used to making jokes at each other's expense. The black man might say in reply something like *So the slave-owner's blood still runs in your veins!* It could be very difficult for an outsider to judge the exact shade of irony in a conversation like this. The better the two know each other, and the firmer their friendship, the more confident they can be of maintaining the ironic tone; but they are skating on thin ice, and we can be sure that if the conversation does go wrong, and the black man is offended, it will not sound very convincing for the white man to claim *I was just being ironic*. Since irony relies on not saying what you really mean, its effect is ruined when we have to say explicitly *That was ironic*.

Let's take a more complex example. Two wealthy and powerful young men are talking, and one says *But that's like woman's reasoning – you can't mean it*. The other smiles and says *I didn't know you were a male chauvinist pig, John*. Which of them (or both, or neither) is being ironic? It's not easy – it may not be possible – to answer that without knowing a good deal about the situation, and about the two men. We'd want to know if the first – or the second – was smiling as he spoke, if anyone else was present (and if so, whether it was a man or a woman), and above all we'd want to hear them,

since intonation is one of the commonest ways of indicating irony in the spoken language. And we'd want to know something of the background: perhaps they have taken part in other conversations in which one of them has been accused – or has accused someone else – of male chauvinism. We might well decide that only those in the know can be certain of the mixture of irony and sincerity; we might even decide that the mixture of irony and sincerity is so subtle that they themselves are not sure about it.

Should we be surprised that such a simple sentence can grow so complicated when we examine it? (Indeed, we could probably uncover even more complications if we probed further.) My answer is 'No': there is nothing surprising about finding such depths of ambiguity in everyday speech, for colloquial language in emotionally charged situations is perhaps the most subtle and complex that language can get – no wonder it fascinates novelists. That is why irony is such a pitfall for the language reformer. The simple instruction that we should avoid certain terms because they are offensive takes no account of irony. But the easy defence, that every time you use an offensive term you can get out of trouble by claiming that you were being ironic, is (like all easy solutions) often unconvincing. This does not, of course, mean that language reform is impossible, but it does mean that it is often trickier than the reformer realises.

We have looked at the problems irony can cause for the politically correct, since this chapter is, after all, about political correctness; but it would be wrong to leave the matter there. I now want to say a few words in praise of irony; for it is one of the great joys of language, and the problems it causes are the consequence of the richness and subtlety that it offers us. Here is a recent example that is so neatly topical that it makes me wince. In his *Online Dictionary*, Andy Ihnatko defines the *real world* – that is, the world outside the virtual reality of cyberspeak – as 'that which cannot be accessed via a keyboard. A nice place to visit, and a good place to swing by when you're out of Coke, but you wouldn't want to live there.' We could spend a long paragraph unpacking what this is saying: the *real world*, which for most of human history has included everything we experience, is now defined negatively as what's left over when one's not sitting at one's computer. We're told we 'wouldn't want to live' precisely where we do live; this asks us to reflect on what we mean by *living*. It's not easy to decide just how ironic Ihnatko is being here, and just how

uneasily we're meant to smile when we read it. Despite (or perhaps because of) its relaxed colloquial style, this sentence is very delicately written.

But simply because of this delicacy, irony can be dangerous. When the danger of hijacking first caused screening of air travellers to be introduced, notices were placed at the screening barriers saying *NO JOKES*, and warning passengers that anything they said would be taken seriously. This is very revealing. It tells us that in tense situations we tend to resort to irony (no doubt lots of people had been saying things like *You'll find the bomb in my left-hand pocket*), but that if the situation is really urgent, we abandon irony. You never hear such remarks now.

Here is an example where not the speaker but the author is being ironic. When Mr Collins, the pompous and self-satisfied clergyman in *Pride and Prejudice*, proposes to Elizabeth Bennett, she refuses him. This does not discourage him, since, as he explains to her, 'it is usual for young ladies to reject the addresses of the man whom they secretly mean to accept, when he first applies for their favour', and he therefore assures her that he is 'by no means discouraged by what you have just said, and shall hope to lead you to the altar ere long.' Elizabeth is taken aback by this, and repeats her refusal more emphatically, whereupon he assures her just as emphatically that 'I know it to be the established custom of your sex to reject a man on the first application, and perhaps you have already said as much to encourage my suit as would be consistent with the true delicacy of the female character.' Mr Collins has probably never used the word *irony* in his life, and perhaps never uttered an ironic remark; and it is this very naivety which makes him so comic when he accuses Elizabeth of not saying what she means, since he is in effect accusing her of being ironic. In a rather broader sense of the term it is of course Austen who is being ironic here, but her irony does not take the form of a particular remark: it resides in the way she presents the whole situation. And in this situation what possible answer can Elizabeth make, except to insist that she does mean it? She did not, of course, know the slogan that feminists scrawled on walls two hundred years later: *Whatever we say, wherever we go, yes means yes, and no means no*. But if she had, she would surely have been tempted to quote it.

It is, of course, no accident that this couplet deals with sex, since

there is perhaps no situation in which the possibilities of irony are richer, and its dangers greater. The couplet is in fact saying 'We're not being ironic: we mean what we say', and it assumes a situation more urgent than Elizabeth's – that of being raped, not just of receiving an unwanted proposal. Since date rape is an all-too-common reality, and is often justified with the argument that 'she really wanted it, though she said No', I cannot help sympathising with that couplet; but on the other hand, a sexual situation is one in which, very often, not everything is said which is meant. That this can lead to the temptation to interpret 'No' ironically is illustrated by the folk song 'Oh, no John', in which the girl is told by her father, or her absent husband (there are many different versions) to say 'No' to any seducer. She does so, but in the end she yields, still saying 'No, John, no' – either sighing it out ironically, or singing it in response to a question like *Can you resist me any longer?* – in which case of course the irony belongs not to her but to the song. The political incorrectness of this song is so striking that I asked a keen folk singer whether she or her friends had any qualms about singing it. I was told that folk singers love political incorrectness, singing songs about seduction and about wife-beating with great gusto, and groaning if told that they shouldn't.

What then is the relation between what we sing and what we do, between the way we represent life, and the way we live it? On the one hand, there would be no songs about wife-beating if wives had never been beaten; there would be no song about 'No, John, no' if women in sexual situations always said exactly what they meant. Jokes, songs and stories grow out of life, not out of pure fancy. But on the other hand those who sing songs about wife-beating almost certainly do not beat their wives today. Both extreme positions – that the way we speak (or sing) about delicate situations has nothing to do with real life, or that it merely echoes real life – are oversimplifications.

This forces me to end the discussion of irony in a thoroughly unsatisfactory way. To assert that every joke, every ironic remark, every song must be judged morally and politically and condemned if it offends anyone is the extreme of dogmatism. To claim, on the other hand, that we can say what we like as long as we add that it was 'only a joke' or 'meant ironically' is the extreme of licence. In between is the difficult, complex, unsatisfactory position we all have to work out for ourselves. As complex and unsatisfactory as life.



Legislation cannot deal with irony. Social situations cannot banish it. Language reformers cannot deal with it in their rules. Offenders will often use it as an excuse. This does not mean that language reform should be abandoned, but it does mean that it's not easy. And the more sensitivity to the presence of irony the reformer shows, the better chance that the reform will succeed.

### The Past

So tricky can it be to handle the issues raised by verbal hygiene in the world we live in, that to worry about the world that has passed away may seem to be looking for unnecessary trouble. But language belongs to the past as well as to the present. We inherit the language from those who went before us, and will pass it on to our descendants: language is meaningless except as a tradition handed on. Every sentence we utter depends on what the language has been as well as what it now is. This is true of all speech, and especially noticeable when we quote. Asked what we mean by democracy, we often say it is *the government of the people, by the people, for the people*; asked for our moral principles, we might say *an eye for an eye, a tooth for a tooth*; or, with a different morality, *love your enemies*; asked about the individual and society, we might say that *no man is an island*. We may forget, perhaps even not know, that we are quoting (Abraham Lincoln, the Old Testament, the New Testament and John Donne, in these four cases). Told (or reminded) of the fact, we would probably feel strengthened in our view, recognising that there is a long tradition behind our beliefs.

But do we want to say *no man is an island*? Shouldn't it be *no person* or *no man or woman* or *nobody*? There are plenty of other ways of putting it, ways we might prefer. But John Donne wrote (understandably in 1624) 'No man'. If we want to quote him, if we want to show that this admirable sense of social solidarity has been with us for hundreds of years, we can't pretend that he said something different. We can change it, of course, and add a remark like *as he would no doubt say nowadays*, but that is a slippery path to venture on. This is what Donne wrote (in his *Devotions Upon Emergent Occasions*):

*No man is an island, entire of itself; every man is a piece of the continent, a part of the main; if a clod be washed away by the*

*sea, Europe is the less, as well as if a promontory were, as well as if a manor of thy friends or of thine own were; any man's death diminishes me, because I am involved in mankind; and therefore never send to know for whom the bell tolls; it tolls for thee.*

That is, I must confess, not exactly what Donne wrote: I have modernised the spelling, to make it seem less remote and more accessible. That seems a fairly uncontroversial change, not very different from printing a modern edition in a nice clear typeface. But *No man or woman is an island*? That is a different kind of change, surely, since it changes the content of what he wrote. Suppose an Indian reader were to complain that Donne is being Eurocentric: Asia is also the less if a clod is washed away. Suppose a modern radical were to remark that there are class assumptions in the writing: it seems to assume that we move in circles which own manor houses, and perhaps also have servants – ‘send to know for whom the bell tolls’ probably means ‘send your servant’. And even if we confine ourselves to removing the sexism, are we going to change *mankind* as well – to *humanity*? to *all humanity*? to *all men and all women*? There are so many ways we could rewrite it. We could, of course, add a disclaimer: we could say *I'm sure if Donne were alive today he'd have said 'no human being' rather than 'no man.'* But what would it mean to make this claim? Everything Donne wrote is the work of a man who lived from 1572 to 1631. *If he were alive today* is, when we think about it, an odd thing to say: who is *he*? What elements in his writings do we decide to apologise for? His theology? His belief in Hell and damnation? His old-fashioned astronomy?

I once heard a distinguished professor of the Hebrew Bible (it is no longer called the Old Testament in academic circles) reading from the Psalms during a discussion; the passage sounded slightly odd, and I realised that instead of saying *Sing unto God, sing praises to his name*, he was saying ‘sing praises to God's name’, not using the word *his*. Since I know no Hebrew, I asked if there were no personal pronouns in Hebrew; he explained that he was saying *God's* instead of *his* in order to avoid the assumption that God must be thought of as male.

Is that verbal hygiene? I think it more accurate to say that he was mistranslating. To think of God as male is, arguably, wrong in the twenty-first century: I think it is, though many traditional Christians

do not. But to pretend that God is not spoken of as male in the Old Testament is, quite simply, to mislead. The aim of professors of Hebrew, as of all scholars, is to tell us the truth.

What we write is what we write. Others can struggle with it, interpret it, be inspired by it, regret parts of it, find ways of explaining it, even of explaining it away. But the one thing they must not do is pretend that we wrote something different. To cut ourselves off from the past, by never quoting, never drawing on tradition, is to be less than human; to rewrite the past is to lie; to struggle to use the past honestly, wrestling with what has changed and what has stayed the same, is to be human.

### **The Power of Language**

How much does linguistic hygiene matter? We have touched on this, but perhaps a fuller discussion would be helpful. It is parallel to the question of how much politeness (or manners, or courtesy?) matters. There is on the one hand the view summed up in the old rhyme 'Sticks and stones may break my bones, but names will never hurt me': the view that it is no doubt desirable to talk in a non-hostile way, but it does not really matter very much compared with what we actually do. Against this is the view that language is itself dangerous because it influences our thoughts and, through them, our actions: that we should not dismiss 'unhygienic' language as trivial, because it is a symptom – even a cause – of what we actually do. Let us call the first the 'sticks-and-stones view', and the second the view that 'language is power'. Which is the truer view?

If we are looking for moral advice, rather than truth, the answer is easy. We should hold the sticks-and-stones view when we are the offended party, and the case concerns the language used by others towards us; and the language-is-power view when we are ourselves speaking, and the case concerns the feelings of others. On a practical level, the argument could stop there, but I will indulge in a little theorising before leaving the subject – or rather, allow George Orwell to do a little theorising. The most famous – and frightening – modern view that language is indeed very powerful is George Orwell's account of 'Newspeak'.

Newspeak is the name he gives to the form of English that has become the official language of the totalitarian state in his very influ-

ential novel about the future, *Nineteen Eighty-Four*. In the frightening totalitarian society that Orwell imagines, Newspeak is the main instrument of thought control:

*It was intended that when Newspeak had been adopted once and for all, and Oldspeak forgotten, a heretical thought – that is, a thought diverging from the principles of Ingsoc – should be literally unthinkable, at least so far as thought is dependent on words ... To give a single example. The word free still existed in Newspeak, but it could only be used in such statements as ‘This dog is free from lice’ or ‘This field is free from weeds’. It could not be used in its old sense of ‘politically free’ or ‘intellectually free’, since political and intellectual freedom no longer existed even as concepts and were therefore of necessity nameless.*

The state that Orwell imagines can see into your home (by two-way television) and can spy on everything you do; most frightening, according to Orwell’s view, is that it controls language itself, and thus thought. *Nineteen Eighty-Four* is of course a nightmare rather than a matter-of-fact prophecy, but the danger of Newspeak seems to be presented to us quite seriously, and so I would like to offer some reassurance. Orwell’s account of spying and torture is certainly frightening, but the account of how language controls the inhabitants is so implausible that it is nothing to be frightened of. The crucial ambiguity in the account of Newspeak is whether the state controls language by direct exercise of power, or whether it has discovered some linguistic means of control. The first of these is nothing new: forbidding people to use certain words and expressions is always possible, and indeed is very old. (In the Old Testament it is forbidden to utter the name of God, and hence he is usually referred to as Adonai, the Lord.) Laws to forbid blasphemy, and customs that forbid obscenity, have always been with us, although they have never been completely successful and are perhaps weaker today than they have ever been. As we saw in the discussion of register, such linguistic prohibitions have usually resulted in the forbidden words leading a vigorous underground life. There are even examples of entire languages being forbidden: in South Africa after the Boer War, Afrikaner children were sometimes forbidden to speak Afrikaans in school or even in the playground; there are similar tales of the treatment of Welsh

children, or of Catalan children in Fascist Spain. If these prohibitions had any effect, it was probably to encourage the spread of the language. Whether the state in *Nineteen Eighty-Four* would be so much more efficient that it could catch and punish anyone who used the word *free* to mean 'intellectually free' is not a linguistic question at all, but a question of how effective we think state power can ever be.

Orwell then adds what can be seen as a genuinely linguistic point, the claim that a heretical thought would be 'literally unthinkable', but on this he is so vague that it is difficult to know just what thought processes he has in mind. It is certainly not true that we are unable to think thoughts unless the words for them are already available: if it were, there could be no new ideas. Orwell probably had something like this in mind when he added the clause that destroys his whole argument, 'at least so far as thought is dependent on words.' To this we have to say that thought is not, in that way, dependent on words. Darwin invented the idea of natural selection, Saussure the idea of language as a system of differences, and Einstein the idea of general and special relativity – ideas that in a very real sense did not previously exist, and the terms for which did not exist either. That did not prevent these thinkers inventing the ideas, and once this had been done they simply had to combine existing words, or give them new meanings, or invent a new word.

Language is powerful, but not, fortunately, as powerful as that.