# POLITICALLY CORRECT LANGUAGE USE
# AS CHALLENGING RACISM

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Political correctness (PC) movement evolved in 1970s in the United States, the fact that accounts for "race" being the primary context of PC application. To sound politically correct means to sound "inclusive". It refers to the use of language that would not cause an individual of any demographic, social or cultural group to feel excluded, offended, or diminished.

In the nineteenth century, the concept of "race" was used to argue that there were distinct physical and genetic differences between groups that constituted humankind. It was suggested that these "fixed" biological "differences" were "natural" and evident in skin colour, head shape, facial features, hair type and physique. This led scientists to assert that there was a racial typology with a hierarchy of "races", and that certain "races" were innately superior to others.

The lack of scientific evidence for a racial typology led to such theories being discredited. In contemporary times "race" is seen as a dynamic social, historical and variable category which is constantly recreated and modified through human interaction. Colin Kidd considers that "race... exists as a property of our minds, not of their bodies. It is a bogus scientific category rather than a fact of nature, and belongs not so much to the realm of objective biology as to the quite distinct realm of human subjectivity... race, then, is more properly a social and cultural construct" [3, p. 18].

Ethnicity is a contested term used to refer to cultural identity that defines the members of a group. Cultural affiliations can be based around a sense of shared history, religion, language or political identity. It has been introduced by writers as an alternative to the "race" concept, with "ethnicity" used to highlight the cultural, as opposed to biological, basis of group membership.

Thus, racism is an ideology, structure and process in which inequalities inherent in the wider social structure are related in a deterministic way to biological and cultural factors attributed to those who are seen as a different "race" or ethnic group. Racism is created and reproduced out of a complex set of circumstances. A variety of attitudes, practices and types of behaviour which may not necessarily be overt or intentional but which serve to discriminate against or to marginalise people judged to be of another "race".

The biological "boundaries" between any human divisions are circumstantial and largely dependent on what traits are chosen for emphasis. However, the non-existence of human races (subspecies) does not mean the non-existence of racism, the structured systematic oppression against individuals and groups defined based on physical traits that reflect an extremely limited fraction of the human genome [2].

People from ethnic minorities suffer from different types of discrimination, for instance, they have much higher rates of unemployment and are disproportionately represented in low paid jobs [4]. Words can reinforce beliefs and prejudices, but can also be used to challenge racism. Moreover, they don't only convey the message, but shape the speaker's thoughts and actions.

PC movement in this context deals with ethnic minority people and historically oppressed people. Below are some examples. "Black" is a term that embraces people who experience structural and

institutional discrimination because of their skin colour and is often used politically to refer to people of African, Caribbean and South Asian origin to imply solidarity against racism.

The term originally took on political connotations with the rise of black activism in the USA in the 1960s when it was reclaimed as a source of pride and identity in opposition to the many negative connotations relating to the word "black" in the English language (black leg, black list etc.). In the UK, however, there is an on-going debate about the use of this term to define South Asian peoples because of the existence of diverse South Asian cultural identities. In the USA, the term "people of colour" is increasingly used instead of, or alongside "black".

Whilst there are many differences between and within each of the groups, the inclusive term "black" refers to those who have a shared history of European colonialism, neo-colonialism, imperialism, ethnocentrism and racism. One solution to this is to refer to "black peoples", "black communities" etc., in the plural to imply that there are a variety of such groups. It is also important to be aware of the fact that in some contexts "black" can also be used in a racist sense.

As for "Negro/Negress", it is a dated term with racist overtones unless used historically. "African-American" is the preferred in the US. Today it is politically correct to say "African American" only when talking about Americans who have immigrated from or hold dual-citizenship in an African country. Otherwise the person is simply an American. In the case of a person's citizenship uncertainty, "Black" and "White" are acceptable terms.

"Non-White" is a problematic term because it groups and homogenises a large part of the world's population by what they are not. It also implies that "White" is the norm against which 'otherness' is measured.

"Coloured" is regarded as outdated in the UK and should be avoided as it is generally viewed as offensive to many black people. When applied to South Africa, the term reflects issues of ethnic divide and apartheid, and needs to be contextualised and used with specificity. As I have already mentioned, in the United States of America, the term "people of colour" is often used as a form self-reference for people who suffer from racism and discrimination on the basis of visible skin colour difference to the white Anglo-Saxon (WASP) politically dominant population.

Is it politically correct to say "American"? When referring to America, it is important to be aware of the fact that there is a North America and a South America - not just the USA. Consequently, when referring to the USA, it is best to explicitly say so.

As for the use of "British", hyphenated or twinned designations such as "Black British", "British Asian" and "Chinese British" are becoming more common ways to refer to second and third generation people, many of whom have been born in Britain, but wish to retain a sense of their origins. One advantage of such designations is that it avoids a suggestion that a person has to choose between them for their identity.

However, the idea of "British" can imply a false sense of unity. Many Scots, Welsh and Irish resist being identified as British and the territory denoted by the term contains a wide variety of cultures, language and religions.

In conclusion it is worth while mentioning that the PC movement is widely dispersed and obviously includes many more elements than the above-discussed. However, the ones concerning racial identity groups are probably the most insidious and misunderstood. Understanding of the world is a product not of the world as it is, but of textual history. Our language conventions are dependent on social processes. To be more precise, our language about the world operates as a mirror of the latter, and discourse about the world is largely based on social processes which in turn are mounted in terms of linguistic rules and options.

## Literature references

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