

Bias-Free and Inclusive English

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"I know this isn't very PC of me, but..." So start a thousand of sentences a day when someone wishes to express an opinion that is based on a stereotype. "Political correctness" or "PC" has solidly entered the American lexicon and been exported to Russia with the calque «политкорректность». But the concept and precepts of political correctness remain controversial in the US and somewhat misunderstood in Russia. Translators and scholars either consider it a bit of a joke, or, at the other end of the spectrum, take it as Law, fearing that one misstatement will bring out the language police, who will handcuff the miscreants and take them off to a multicultural prison, where they will have to write on the blackboard 100 times: "Each student must hand in *his or her* essay on time."

The truth lies, as usual, in the middle.

How it all began

Starting in the 1960s America was swept by a number of major movements for social change: the civil rights and "black pride" movements, the women's liberation movement, the "human potential" movement, the movement for independent living among people with disabilities, the Native American movement, the "sexual revolution," the movement of gays and lesbians to "come out of the closet." At the same time, divorce and non-traditional families (including single mothers) became more acceptable, and many women joined the workforce -- not only for professional fulfillment, but often (perhaps more often) out of economic necessity.

When American women in the 1960s and 1970s began to look for jobs, they came up against two hard facts: traditionally women's professions paid much less than traditionally men's professions, and women in the same jobs as men earned much less than their male colleagues.¹ In one university women who were departmental secretaries (usually with degrees or even advanced university degrees) earned about \$12,000 per year, whereas male groundskeepers (who did not have college educations) earned about \$25,000 per year. That case eventually went to the courts, but, of course, was not resolved for many years. In the meantime, a divorced woman with children to feed and clothe looked at the job market and thought: "Well, if I can double my income by raking leaves, I'll rake leaves." Much of the movement of women into "men's jobs" in the US was not driven so much by a desire to open up new frontiers as by simple economic considerations.

But when people began to take on new jobs and roles, they discovered very quickly that the English language didn't have the right words to describe "a woman janitor" or "a stay-at-home husband." Psychological research on the power of the word to shape perception and behavior (in consumer and political advertising, as well as in academic fields) suggested that the old words were not only inadequate, they were holding back

¹ According to the National Committee on Pay Equity, in 1963 American women who worked full time made 59 cents on average for every dollar earned by men. In 2002, women earned 77 cents to the dollar. That is, the "wage gap" between men and women in the US has narrowed by less than half a cent a year. My women friends and I felt this acutely in the 1980s in New York City. Every morning as we walked to the subway, my room-mate would give her version of the saying, "Another day, another dollar" as "Another day, another 63 cents to their dollar."

change. “If there’s no word for it, it doesn’t exist.” But if it did exist – it was time to invent some new words.

The first harbinger of change was the honorific Ms. (plural: Mses. or Mss.), which was invented to provide parity with Mr.: if “Mr.” didn’t indicate marital status, why should women announce theirs with the honorifics Miss and Mrs.?² I recall very well the fevered media discussions about this – “it sounds awful, it’s not natural, it’s an imposition of a minority point of view on the majority” – as well as the hissed “Mzzzz” that reluctant speakers used when addressing women this way. (This was similar to the response to *CHГ* when it appeared in Russia: *Кто мы – Сенегальцы, что ли?* went the joke.) But (like *CHГ*) Ms. held its ground, and now seems natural to the vast majority of Americans.

If at first women headed the movement to change the language to fit their new roles, other groups soon joined in. The underlying logic was simple: words have power to shape perception, and many of the words and expressions we commonly use -- “Latin lover,” “sissy,” “Dutch treat,” “to gyp someone,” “chairman,” “girls in the typing pool”-- perpetuate ethnic, gender or other stereotypes (usually derogatory or limiting). Being “politically correct” meant “adopting a policy of speaking correctly” about people, that is, speaking about them respectfully, as they wish to be spoken of, without bias and demeaning stereotypes. The 2000 edition of the American Heritage Dictionary of the English Language, Fourth Edition, defines it more broadly: “relating to or supporting broad social, political, and educational change, especially to redress historical injustices in matters such as race, class, gender, and sexual orientation.”

On the face of it, what could be less controversial? The call was to apply, with greater sensitivity, basic standards of politeness and respect to language use with regard to people in a larger effort to eliminate discrimination.

But it turns out that how one uses language – one’s idiolect – is an integral part of one’s self, and external pressure to change internal processes was difficult for some to bear and bitterly resented. Many people were insulted when told “how to speak” or accused of being making slurs they did not intend. Another problem was that the alternatives suggested at first – chairperson, firepeople, etc. – were awkward, clumsy, and didn’t even sound like English. Others rebelled because the changes in language “neutralized” judgment; for example, they believed that calling prostitutes “commercial sex workers” legitimized them in a way they found objectionable.

And in some cases, of course, people simply didn’t want to drop their prejudices. The business executive who balked at calling his secretary “a woman” instead of “my girl,” the postal worker who couldn’t get used to calling his boss, an African American woman, Ms. Jones, or the scandalized neighbor who thought “the house-husband” next door was an aberration – these Americans rebelled. “PC” became a term of ridicule. For example, the Devil’s Dictionary defines “politically correct” as “diplomatic; asinine; referring only to those racial and sexual groups not represented in present company as superlative; reverse elitism.”³ Dozens of purportedly “politically correct

² It was only recently in the US that Miss and Mrs. became solely indicators of marital status. In the 19th century (and in some places later) women were usually called Mrs. once they attained middle age, married or not.

³ <http://sedition.com/ddx/w/672/html>.

terms” (like “follicly challenged” for “bald”) were produced to show what a joke it all was.⁴

Now “politically correct” is used more often to describe an action or position that is in some way expedient: “The company decision to move the office to that part of town was politically correct,” (that is, it made the company look good). However, the movement to make English more “people-friendly” continues, called now “bias-free” or “inclusive” language.⁵

Naming

One the main tenets of this new way of speaking is calling people what they wish to be called. Many nationalities, religious and ethnic groups had one name for themselves, while outsiders (most Western Europeans) called them something else.⁶

<i>Instead of</i>	<i>Try</i>
Aborigines	Australian Aboriginal peoples (or name of group)
Bushmen	San
Colored person	Black/black, African American; person of color (if the person chooses this)
Eskimos	Inuit
Gypsies	Roma
Spanish-speaking	Check with the people or institutional policy: Latino/Latina; Hispanic (found objectionable by some), or (preferably) refer to individual ethnic groups
Indians (American)	Native Americans, American Indians, or use the tribal name
Lapps, Lapland	Sami, Saamiland
(American) Negro	Black/black, African American, Afro-American
Moonie	Member of the Unification Church
Mormon	Member of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints
Moslem, Mohammedan	Muslim
Mulatto	Person of mixed ancestry, biracial, multiracial

⁴ Indeed, it should be noted that the second definition for “politically correct” in the American Heritage Dictionary is “being or perceived of being over-concerned with such change, often to the exclusive of other matters.”

⁵ Interestingly, the phrase “politically correct” has a much older history, although, it would appear, it was largely confined to language use in matters of state. “The earliest cited usage of the term comes from the U.S. Supreme Court decision *Chisholm v. Georgia* (1793): “The states, rather than the People, for whose sakes the States exist, are frequently the objects which attract and arrest our principal attention [...]. Sentiments and expressions of this inaccurate kind prevail in our common, even in our convivial, language. Is a toast asked? ‘The United States,’ instead of the ‘People of the United States,’ is the toast given. This is not politically correct.” Another example of earlier usage is from a passage of H. V. Morton’s *In the Steps of St. Paul* (1936): “To use such words would have been equivalent to calling his audience ‘slaves and robbers’. But Galatians, a term that was politically correct, embraced everyone under Roman rule, from the aristocrat in Antioch to the little slave girl in Iconium.” www.webster-dictionary.org/definition/political%20correctness.

⁶ Many of the examples in this article are from: Rosalie Maggio, *Talking About People: A Guide to Fair and Accurate Language* (Phoenix, Arizona: Oryx Press, 1997). Maggio is one of the specialists on bias-free language in the US.

Oriental	Asian, Asian American, or (preferably) refer to individual ethnic groups
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When speaking about Americans who identify themselves by their ethnic background, the preferred use is non-hyphenated: Japanese Americans, Irish Americans, Arab Americans (it is hyphenated only when used as an adjective: “Cuban-American store”). Note that it is considered inappropriate to say “Americans, Irish Americans, and Cuban Americans”; the implication is that there is one group of “real Americans” and the rest are something less. Parallel constructions are preferable: “European Americans, Irish Americans, and Cuban Americans.”

In the US, people who are homosexual prefer to be called gay if they are men and lesbian if they are women. However, it makes sense to use the term “homosexual” in the context of earlier historical periods (before World War Two) or different cultures, since “gay” is marked as a modern American word. No one seems to be satisfied with the terms for a same-sex mate; you can try companion, partner, or friend.⁷

“Elderly,” “frail,” “old lady,” “old man,” “oldster,” and “oldie” are considered patronizing and demeaning. Apparently few people view themselves as truly “old” – even people in their 80s think they are just getting on in years -- so “older” is a safe word to use for anyone past middle age. “Senile” should not be used as a synonym for “forgetful” or “old.” If some one has senile dementia, they are said to have Alzheimer’s disease.

The disability rights movement in the US developed the concept of “people first”: people see themselves as people first and only then as “people with a disease.” They do not wish to be identified as their disease or disability (“a diabetic”), as a collective noun (“the disabled”), or as “victims” or “sufferers.”

<i>Instead of</i>	<i>Try</i>
A diabetic	A person with diabetes
An AIDS victim	A person with AIDS/who has AIDS/living with AIDS
Birth defect	Congenital disability
Dwarf	Little person, person of short stature
the handicapped, the blind, the deaf, etc.	A person with a disability, a blind person (person with vision impairment); a deaf person (person with hearing impairment), etc.
Retard (feeble-minded, imbecile, moron, idiot)	A person with developmental delays, a person with mental disability/impairment/retardation
Spastic	A person with cerebral palsy
Stutterer	A person with a speech impediment

Not naming

Once you get a sense of the preferred ways to refer to ethnic groups and others, it is disconcerting to learn that a second tenet of bias-free speech is NOT naming people. That is, information about race, ethnic background, sexual orientation, gender, etc. should only be included if it is relevant. If you say “a male nurse” and “a nurse,” you are implying (intentionally or not) that being a female nurse is normal and unmarked, but being a male nurse is not. “The disabled librarian helped me find a book” is appropriate

⁷ It is considered offensive to refer to “lifestyles” with regard to gays and lesbians.

to say if you want to distinguish that librarian from the other *non-disabled* one. But if it is simply information you noted because the person is different or not what you expected in some way, then it is considered improper to include it.

Demeaning expressions and stereotypes

It need not be said that it is utterly inappropriate in any setting to use demeaning ethnic or other nicknames, such as “wop” (Italian), “mick” (Irish person), “chink” (Chinese), “spaz” (person with cerebral palsy) or “crip” (person with a disability).⁸ However, there are some expressions whose origins are half-forgotten; for example “to gyp someone” is considered derogatory to the Roma (it’s derived from the word “Gypsy”). Try using cheat, rip off, soak, swindle, con, or pull one over on instead. There are a number of expressions using the word “Dutch”: Dutch treat, talk like a Dutch uncle, Dutch courage, double Dutch. Although few people regard the expressions as pejorative, they portray Hollanders as cheap, cowardly, dishonest and blunt. Suggested usage: separate checks (for Dutch treat); talk bluntly, chew out, call on the carpet (for “talk like a Dutch uncle”); sham courage, courage from a bottle (for “Dutch courage”); nonsense (for “double Dutch”).

What if you don’t think of “Dutch courage” in terms of people from Holland, but just like the expression? The response is: how would a Hollander feel if you said, “That’s just Dutch courage; he’s not brave at all?”

But, as Rosalie Maggio writes, there are moments when most people say, “That’s going too far!” There are times when you think, “I like that word, I have no intention of offending anyone with the word, I think it’s ridiculous that someone might be offended, so I’m going to use it.” And sometimes (rarely) things do go too far. Recently an official in England was accused of racism for using the expression “nitty-gritty,” (“the heart of the matter,” “the essence of something”) which, the accuser said, was a word used to describe what was left in the hold of a slave ship after the live slaves had been released. Etymologists disagree: they can find no reference to the phrase before the 1920s.

If the accusation was unfair, it is a good example of why it’s worth watching one’s tongue. People who have been on the receiving end of slurs all their lives are sensitive to the slightest intimation of derogatory language.

What do you do if you slip? You apologize, say you hadn’t known or intended to be insulting, and thank them for letting you know so that you won’t do it again.

Job titles and honorifics

In the old days in the US, doctors were men, secretaries and nurses were women, and men in uniform were men in uniform. That’s changed, of course, and the new vocabulary of job titles does not imply gender. Below are some preferred terms, which are far more graceful than the first attempts to rename professionals in the 1970s and 1980s.

<i>Instead of</i>	<i>Try</i>
Bar man/barmaid	Bar staff
Businessman	Executive, business executive, manager, professional, entrepreneur, industrialist,

⁸ People within groups may use these terms with regard to themselves as a way of “claiming” the language. However, it is never appropriate for people outside the group to use them.

	financier, magnate, business owner
Chairman	Chair, chairperson, facilitator, convenor
Congressman	Member of Congress, representative, congressional representative, legislator
Clergyman, man of the cloth	Clergy, members of the clergy, minister, priest
Craftsman	Artisan, handicrafts worker, trade worker
Fireman	Fire-fighter
Foreman	Supervisor, team or work leader, line manager, section head, chief, director
Founding fathers	Founders, writers of the Constitution, forebears, ancestors (depending on context)
Housewife/househusband	Homemaker
Spokesman	Representative, official, speaker, source, advocate, agent, PR coordinator, speechmaker, public information manager
Stewardess/steward	Flight attendant
Tradesman	Trader, shopkeeper, small business owner, merchant, retailer, dealer
Workman	Worker

It is also recommended to avoid noting gender when it is unexpected to you (“woman electrician,” “male secretary”), or using any of the “-ette” or “-ess” endings: use instead actor, poet, author, usher, waiter, villain, etc.

What doesn’t change? Titles such as Duke and Duchess, Abbott and Abbess, and any historical names (the Green Mountain Men). It’s also appropriate to use gender-marked terms (congressmen and congresswomen) in reference to individuals or in parallel constructions.

When referring to or introducing professionals, it is considered proper to use parallel constructions: if you introduce a male colleague as Dr. John Smith, you should refer to his colleague as Dr. Susan Jones (not Susan or Susan Jones). When writing a letter to an unknown person, either write Dear Sir/Madam or Dear Mr./Ms.. You can also use the job title: “Dear (or “To”) Manager, Editor, Colleague(s), Committee Member, Board Member, Publisher, Sales Agent,” etc. If someone has written you and you can’t tell if the person is male or female from the name, it’s appropriate to write “Dear Okan Erener.”⁹

“Man as false generic”

This is perhaps the most contentious issue in bias-free writing -- and seems to have been contentious for centuries. According to Rosalie Maggio: “Following a rule invented in 1846 by John Kirby, who decreed that the male gender is ‘more comprehensive than the female,’ in 1850 by Act of the British Parliament, ‘he’ was declared generic and legally inclusive of ‘she’.”¹⁰ By this rule and law, “prehistoric man was a hunter” could

⁹ I once had a very polite and lengthy correspondence with someone in Turkey; neither of us could tell the other’s gender by name, and of course English doesn’t reveal gender in verb forms. It wasn’t until we met that we stopped referring to each other by first and last names – and also had a good laugh. Okan, I learned, is a man.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 7. Other debates about women and language have been going on still longer in Western Europe. Maggio notes that in “585 at the Council of Macon, 43 Catholic bishops and 20 men representing bishops

mean “prehistoric men and women were hunters,” or it could mean “prehistoric men were hunters” (and prehistoric women did something else). The problem with this is twofold: first, it’s not clear when writers or speakers mean “men” and when they mean “men and women.” And secondly, the profusion of grammatical constructions, words and expressions using the words “man,” “men” and “he/him” creates a kind of linguistic landscape that is largely masculine.

Bias-free writing and speaking strive to eliminate generic uses of “man” and the masculine pronoun in speech and in sayings, either by using different terms or by using plural or passive constructions. For example:

<i>Instead of</i>	<i>Try</i>
The man we want for the job	The person we want for the job
Man in the street	average person, ordinary person, people in general, lay person, non-specialist
Time waits for no man.	Time waits for no one.
Each student must finish his essay by Friday.	Students must finish their essays by Friday; the students’ essays must be finished by Friday.
A student who wants his essay returned...	Anyone who wants an essay returned... All who want their essays returned...
Man-day	Work-day, average worker day
Manhandle	Abuse, mistreat, maltreat, mishandle, damage, maul
Manhole	Sewer hole, utility access hole, vent hole
Man-hours	Total hours, employee hours, hours worked/hours of work, labor time
Manmade	Synthetic, artificial, handmade, machine-made, homemade, mass-produced (depending on context and meaning)
Manpower	Workforce, personnel, human resources, staff, workers, employees, labor
To man something	To staff, operate, run, staff

You should note that many words in English with “man” are derived from the Latin for “hand” (*manus*) and have no sexist implications: for example, manacle, manager, mandate, manual, manufacture, manuscript. Other words have roots not connected with males; for example, “mania” is from the Greek for “spirit.” (Jokes aside, no one is advocating for “personacle” or “personsuscript.”)

All the same, this is where many people say, “That’s going too far!” Surely, they argue, people understand that “prehistoric man” is just a saying and refers to both men and women? And surely people don’t think the world is populated only by men because of the use of the masculine pronoun? Research, however, shows that what is clear to one is not necessarily clear to another. Maggio cites the example of an American high school student who explained why his western civilization textbook only used the words “man” and “mankind”: “Women were dogs,” he wrote. “You might as well say ‘men and their dogs plowed the fields’... The reason women aren’t mentioned in our book is that women did nothing, contributed nothing, were nothing.”¹¹ (He definitely missed the

debate the topic ‘Are Women Human?’ After lengthy argument, the vote was 32 yes, 31 no; by one vote women were declared human.” (p 199)

¹¹ *Ibid.*, p 10.

message that “he includes she.”) Another study showed when a group of young children were shown “genderless” pictures of rabbits, dinosaurs and babies, 97 percent of the boys identified them as male, and 81 percent of the girls did, too.¹² And the phrase, “every American child knows that he may grow up to be President” could be understood as “only men may apply for the job.”

Some of this may seem like a “tempest in a teapot” to Russian readers, partially because Russian does not have this gender imbalance. The Russian language contains thousands of nouns that are feminine gender, from the delicate (*роза*) to the mighty (*стихия*) to the weighty (*весомость*) to the complex (*психология*).¹³ In English all that are “feminine” are machines, ships and cars or natural disasters (storms and hurricanes). Even words that apply to a woman specifically are sometimes markedly masculine (“she’s a freshman at Yale”).

In a way, American women are echoing what the poet Marina Tsvetaeva wrote in response to the 1918 changes in orthography that eliminated some forms of the feminine plural: *Революция уничтожила в русской орфографии женский род: райские [не райскія] розы. Равноправие, т.е. будь мужчиной – или совсем не быть!* The call for inclusive language in English is not an attempt to make English “genderless,” but rather to insert gender into the language, to make sure that “she” is in the language as often as “he” is – or at least ensure that “he” is not the only personage.

Perhaps this is pushing the psycho-linguistic envelope too far. Indeed, political correctness is derived in part from the Sapir-Whorf Hypothesis, which remains controversial in the US.¹⁴ The hypothesis posits that language influences thought by influencing perception and cognition, the worldview of the individual, and the structure of logic and what is perceived as logical.¹⁵ Some scholars do not agree with this hypothesis. But if we do accept that words and grammar have power to influence our worldview, why shouldn’t we accept that use of gender in a language has the same power and influence? It may be subtle, it may affect people to a greater or lesser degree, it may be only one of many factors shaping individuals’ perception of themselves and their worlds, but it is part of the logic of the language that influences perception of the world.

So what’s a poor translator to do?

When translating from English into Russian: in most cases – nothing. These are issues for English-speakers; Russian usage should be determined by Russians. Besides, the majority of these changes in English are simply not applicable to Russian. If you note that the text reads “artificial” or “synthetic” instead of “manmade,” all the same you’ll translate it as «искусственный» or «сделанный руками человека». In other cases, you can’t get around the laws of gender: “the person who came” is going to be *человек, который пришёл* no matter what English speakers think about the masculine pronoun. And in a discussion among medical professionals, even if the English speaker ensures that gender is not mentioned in reference to nurses, in Russian you will call them all *медицинские работники среднего звена*, or refer to one person as *медицинский брат* and another as *медицинская сестра*. (On the other hand, don’t assume that “nurse” in English refers only to *медицинская сестра*.)

¹² *Ibid.*, p 6.

¹³ I would be grateful for research on the percentages of Russian nouns that are masculine, neuter and feminine.

¹⁴ www.webster-dictionary.org/definition/political%20correctness.

¹⁵ Everett M. Rogers and Thomas M. Steinfatt, *Intercultural Communication* (Prospect Heights, Illinois: Waveland Press, Inc., 1999), p 136.

It is more problematic when inclusive language is a key part of the communicative message in English: all my attempts to “mark” the Russian in order to emphasize the politically correct English usage violate the laws of Russian grammar. I would be grateful to learn what Russian translators and interpreters have done in such situations.

When translating for groups of people with disabilities, people living with HIV-AIDS, or other groups in Russia that have adopted much of English’s bias-free language, it’s best to check your usage before you start translating. For example, «люди с инвалидностью», «люди, живущие с ВИЧ/СПИДом» have become the preferred expressions in Russian.¹⁶

What you shouldn’t do: use calques indiscriminately. Not long ago I heard a TV announcer describe someone as *афро-американец, гражданин Канады*. If he was an African American, how could he be a citizen of Canada? As Dr. Yermolovich never tires of pointing out: if it doesn’t make logical sense – don’t say it!

When translating from Russian into English I recommend that translators become familiar with the basics of bias-free usage, particularly with regard to preferred job titles and names of ethnic and other groups. A spoken or written translation that refers to Bushmen (rather than San), men of the cloth (in reference to the foreign clergy) or policemen (in reference to American police officers of both genders) will be perceived as out-of-date or offensive.

What if the Russian you are interpreting uses “incorrect language” such as «он страдает от ВИЧа» or «конгрессмены»? It’s your judgment call. But if you think there is no intention to offend, then it might make sense to use currently acceptable terms (someone with HIV, members of Congress).

What about expressions using “man” and pronoun use? I would say it depends on the subject and the audience. If you are translating a scholarly article for an academic press, I recommend using inclusive and non-sexist language, since this has become the norm in the US academic community. In any case, it is a good idea to ask for style guidelines, since policies differ among institutions and publishing houses.

When you are interpreting, it’s hard to “reprogram” your brain to make *Кто-то оставил свой доклад на подиуме* come out as “someone left *his or her* speech on the podium” (or even the less cumbersome “someone left a speech on the podium,” “there’s a speech on the podium”). If you think this is an issue for your audience, try to do it. If you think it isn’t an issue for your audience, or if you can’t change your usage easily, or if you think this is “going too far” – then don’t. This isn’t Law; it’s suggested usage.

In your professional dealings with American colleagues, what should you do? I personally subscribe to the dictum: when in Rome, do as the Romans do. However, not all my compatriots concur and may expect “American” behavior and language when abroad. It’s helpful to know this, but ultimately – it’s your choice.

If you are challenged about your use of English or behavior, you can point to the differences in Russian grammar and culture. But if you get challenged often, you might

¹⁶ See www.hiv-aids.ru for Russian language use with regard to HIV-AIDS and <http://perspektiva-inva.ru/publications-our-etiket.shtml> for a detailed article on language use with regard to people with disabilities.

rethink your position. After all, we are only employable if we satisfy our clients, and if they demand bias-free language, we'll have to comply to keep in business.

A call for dialog

This article presents the rationale for bias-free and inclusive language use in English and offers some examples of "people-friendly" language. I hope that others will continue to write about this, particularly on problems that arise in translating, interpreting, and professional relations with foreign colleagues.