**Political correctness and its influence on language**

**Definition**

Political correctness or being ‘politically correct’, often called simply PC, is the principle of avoiding language and behaviour that may offend particular groups of people.

**Crucial issues**

The PC movement is concerned with avoiding certain attitudes, actions and, above all, racist or sexist language which suggest prejudice with respect to race, religion and gender.

Prejudice and offence may be against men or women, older people, and people with a particular skin colour, ethnic background or physical-mental disability.

Specifically, the PC movement supporters object to:

1. The use of terms that they consider sexist (especially as used by men against women) or racist (as used by whites against blacks), or terms used against the physically or mentally impaired, older people, short people, etc.;
2. Stereotypes, such as the assumption that women are less intelligent than men, and blacks less intelligent than whites;
3. Inappropriate laughter, such as jokes at the expense of the disabled, homosexuals, and ethnic minorities.

Some general changes brought about by the PC movement include, for example:

- In education: history has been traditionally taught from the point of view of white people; now students learn also about the history and culture of other groups in the community;
- In offices: sexual and racial harassment are not allowed;
- In public opinion: the PC movement has fought stereotyping, especially of women and black people, and making jokes against minority groups.

**Examples**

A major concern of PC is to avoid racist or sexist language. That has brought to changes in everyday use. Changes in the US include saying

- **African Americans** instead of **Blacks**,  
- **Native American** instead of **Indian, Red Indian, redskin**  
- **people of colour** instead of **coloured**, referring to people who are not white.

In British English, the term **Black**, as a noun, in more common in the plural. It can sound offensive in the singular. Instead, you can use the adjective (*a black man/woman*). In the US, African American is in use.

Some language changes are much older than the PC movement. The abbreviation **Ms** (pron. /mæs/) has been used for a long time as a title for women when you do not want to specify whether they are married (**Mrs**) or single (**Miss**), or when you do not know whether they are married or not.
Some generic terms covering both women and men like *mankind, policemen, chairman,* and *man* in the sense of people in general, are criticized because they point out the word “man”, thus perpetuating the subordinate role of women. Suggested forms are:

- *chair* or *chairperson* instead of *chairman*
- *police officer* instead of *policeman* or *policewoman*
- *spokesperson* instead of *spokesman* or *spokeswoman*
- *human kind* or *the human race* instead of *mankind*
- *workforce* or *workpower* instead of *manpower* (=”forza lavoro”)  
- *firefighter* instead of *fireman*

Terms such as *businessman/businesswoman, postman/postwoman, sportsman/sportswoman* are in common use, but some people, especially in the US, prefer to use *business person, postal worker, sportsperson.*

Other changes have been less widely accepted. For example, the words *blind* and *deaf* were felt to suggest something negative, so people began using *visually impaired* and *hearing impaired,* which, they believed, did not carry the same negative associations. Less acceptable PC terms include:

- *vertically challenged* (short)
- *differently sized* (fat)
- *physically challenged* (disabled)
- *economically exploited* (poor)
- *involuntarily leisured* (unemployed)
- *domestic operative* (housewife)
- *significant other* (wife, husband, lover or sexual partner).

Such extreme examples as these ones appeared clumsy or an unnecessary to many people, and the term PC came to be used in a negative way. People who were against the idea of political correctness used this type of expressions to ridicule the whole movement. Others doubted whether changing words would remove prejudice in a person’s mind or in the social system.

**Cultural background**

The concept of political correctness developed in the 1980s and 1990s as an ideal of intellectuals and feminists in the USA and later in Britain, and was based on the belief that the language we use influences the way we think.

The Liberian politician Ruth Perry, in her essay "A short history of the term 'politically correct' " (1992), traces the term back to Mao Tse-tung’s *Little Red Book* (1966). According to Perry, the term was then adopted by the radical left in the 1960s.

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The PC views were at first supported by many moderate members of progressive or activist groups, concerned with the rights of minorities.

In the 1990s the term PC became more and more associated with hard-line extremists, and it attracted increasing antagonism by right-wing political groups in the US. Thus, the term PC came to be used in a pejorative sense to discredit the political left in the US, including liberals and Democrats.

In fact, the inflexible condemnation of ‘incorrect’ vocabulary has itself been condemned for its intolerance. Critics of political correctness argue that PC is censorship, attacking free speech by limiting what is considered acceptable public discourse. Other critics say that PC terms are awkward euphemisms for truer, original language. However, in a number of cases the PC movement had a considerable impact. In 1988 Cambridge University teachers voted to eliminate sexist language from the university’s Statutes and Ordinances. In 1988 the Style Manual of the Commonwealth of Australia included a chapter suggesting ways of avoiding sexist language. In 1989 the General Synod of the Church of England debated the need to introduce non-sexist language into the liturgy. In 1989 a revised version of the English Bible substituted one for man in several sentences. In 1990 the mayor of Los Angeles, Tom Bradley, banned sexist terms from city reports.

Alternatives to non-PC writing

The following are more examples of the impact of PC on language, especially in official documents and public addresses (newspapers, TV, radio).

Non-PC: Man and his intellectual development.
Suggested alternative: People and their intellectual development.

Non-PC: This phenomenon has been demonstrated in rats, monkeys and men.
Suggested alternative: This phenomenon has been demonstrated in rats, monkeys and humans.

Non-PC: Woman doctor, lady lawyer.
Suggested alternative: just doctor, lawyer. (If it is necessary to mention the sex of the person, use female doctor and female lawyer.)

Non-PC: Each person was interviewed and his statement was checked.
Suggested alternative: People were interviewed and their statements were checked.

Non-PC: The child learns by exploring his surroundings.
Suggested alternative: The child learns by exploring its surroundings. (Or: Children learn by exploring their surroundings.)