

Chapter 1

Defining Political Correctness

Preamble and Rationale: Words and Ideas, Norms and Values

Political correctness became part of the modern lexicon and, many would say, part of the modern mind-set, as a consequence of the wide-ranging public debate which started on campuses in the United States from the late 1980s. Since nearly 50 percent of Americans go to college, the impact of the controversy was widespread. It was out of this ferment that most of the new vocabulary was generated or became current. However, political correctness is not one thing and does not have a simple history. As a concept it predates the debate and is a complex, discontinuous, and protean phenomenon which has changed radically, even over the past two decades. During just that time it has ramified from its initial concerns with education and the curriculum into numerous agendas, reforms, and issues concerning race, culture, gender, disability, the environment, and animal rights.

Linguistically it started as a basically idealistic, decent-minded, but slightly Puritanical intervention to sanitize the language by suppressing some of its uglier prejudicial features, thereby undoing some past injustices or “leveling the playing fields” with the hope of improving social relations. It is now increasingly evident in two opposing ways. The first is the expanding currency of various key words (to be listed shortly), some of a programmatic nature, such as *diversity*, *organic*, and *multiculturalism*. Contrariwise, it has also manifested itself in speech codes which suppress prejudicial language, disguising or avoiding certain old and new taboo topics. Most recently it has appeared in behavioral prohibitions concerning the environment and violations of animal rights. As a result of these transitions it has become a misnomer, being concerned with neither *politics* nor *correctness* as those terms are generally understood.

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Political correctness inculcates a sense of obligation or conformity in areas which should be (or are) matters of choice. Nevertheless, it has had a major influence on what is regarded as “acceptable” or “appropriate” in language, ideas, behavioral norms, and values. But “doing the right thing” is, of course, an oversimplification. There is an antithesis at the core of political correctness, since it is liberal in its aims but often illiberal in its practices: hence it generates contradictions like *positive discrimination* and *liberal orthodoxy*. In addition, it has surprising historical and literary antecedents, surfacing in different forms and phases in Anglo-Saxon and global culture.

Although this book is called a “history,” it is not really possible to write a conventional sequential history incorporating all these themes, of which there are basically six: political, literary, educational, gender, cultural, and behavioral. This is a large, interesting, but unwieldy package. The choice of “semantics” in the title rather than the broader and more familiar “language” is intentional, mainly because much of the debate was and continues to be about the changing of names, what are commonly known as “Orwellian” substitutions, and many of the practices which – rightly or wrongly – have given “semantics” a questionable name in popular parlance. Semantics (the study of meaning) is, of course, a respectable branch of linguistics unassociated with this practice, and much of the book is taken up with analyzing the semantic changes undergone by individual terms and in the evolution of word-fields.

Any discussion of political correctness necessarily involves its inseparable obverse, political incorrectness, just as “A History of Manners” would perforce involve bad manners, and “A History of Propaganda” would involve not only the techniques employed by propagandists, but the reactions of those being influenced and the strategies of counterpropaganda. For, just as people are suspicious of propaganda and resist it, so the institution of new taboos, especially against referring to personal features of size, color, addiction, and so on invokes feelings, even charges of censorship. These pressures provoke a counterreaction of satire, opportunistic defiance, and outrages, especially in popular culture. These reactions are covered in chapter 8. For all these reasons, the topic cannot be simply reduced to the standard template of “a definition,” a “story,” and a “conclusion.” This complexity in part explains this book’s structure.

The origins are in many ways the strangest feature. “Political Correctness is the natural continuum of the party line. What we are seeing once again is a self-appointed group of vigilantes imposing their views on others. It is a heritage of communism, but they don’t seem to see this.” So wrote Doris Lessing in the *Sunday Times* (May 10, 1992), continuing in this vein in her trenchant essay “Censorship” (2004), which is quoted

among the epigraphs above. She was unambiguous and certainly right: political correctness first emerged in the diktats of Mao Tse-Tung, then chairman of the Chinese Soviet Republic, in the 1930s. But over half a century later it had mutated, rematerializing in a totally different environment, in an advanced secular capitalist society in which freedom of speech had been underwritten by the Constitution for two centuries, and in American universities, of all places. As Christopher Hitchens acutely observed: “For the first time in American history, those who call for an extension of rights are also calling for an abridgement of speech” (in Dunant, 1994, pp. 137–8).

Far from being a storm in an academic inkwell, political correctness became a major public issue engaged in by a whole variety of participants including President George Bush (briefly), public intellectuals, major academics, and journalists of all hues and persuasions. Some claim that the debate was a manufactured rather than a natural phenomenon, and that political correctness started as a chimera or imaginary monster invented by those on the Right of the political spectrum to discredit those who wished to change the status quo. These matters are taken up in chapter 2 “The Origins and the Debate.” The fact is that the debate certainly took place. Exchanges were often acrimonious, focusing on numerous general issues of politics, ideology, race, gender, sexual orientation, culture, the curriculum, freedom of expression and its curtailment and so on. All of these will be discussed and developed.

This work attempts a detailed semantic analysis of how the resources of the language have been deployed, especially in forms of semantic engineering and the exploitation of different registers, both to formulate the new agendas, values, and key words of political correctness and to subvert them. A whole new semantic environment has come into being, through creation, invention, co-option, borrowing, and publicity: a representative sample of this new world of words includes *lookism*, *phallocratic*, *other*, *significant other*, *sex worker*, *multicultural*, *herstory*, *disadvantaged*, *homophobic*, *waitron*, *wimmin*, *differently abled*, *to Bork*, *physically challenged*, *substance abuse*, *fattist*, *Eurocentric*, *Afrocentric*, *demographics*, *issue*, *carbon footprint*, *glass ceiling*, *pink plateau*, and *first people*, as well as code abbreviations like *DWEM*, *PWA*, *HN*, and *neo-con*.

These are not simply new words, in the way that Shakespeare’s *incarnadine*, *procreant*, *exsufflicate*, *be-all and end-all*, *unmanned*, *assassination*, and *yesterdays* were original forms four centuries ago. They are more like Orwell’s artificial coinages in Newspeak, for instance, *thoughtcrime*, *joycamp*, and *doublethink*. Many are of a completely different order of novelty, opaqueness, and oddity, several of a character aptly described by the

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doughty Dr Johnson two centuries ago as “scarce English.” The reaction of the uninitiated, and many of the educated, to this strange new galaxy of word formations or, some would say, deformations, is like that described by Edward Phillips in his *New World of Words*: “Some people if they spy but a hard word are as much amazed as if they had met with a Hobgoblin” (cited in Baugh, 1951, p. 260). That was in 1658, when new words of classical origin were still not welcomed as potential denizens, but rather regarded with suspicion as dubious immigrants disturbing “the King’s English” (as it has been called since 1553).

Language theoretically belongs to all, but is often changed by only a few, many of them anonymous. Resentment at interference or sudden changes in the language has a long history. It started in the sixteenth century with the Inkhorn Controversy, a contretemps about the introduction of alien classical vocabulary, or hostility at semantic innovation of the kind Phillips satirized. In the long run most of these “hard words” as they were originally called, have been accepted. But it has been a very long run. Political correctness is still a relatively new phenomenon, and the serious or general acceptance of these words is still a matter of debate.

Let us briefly consider a fairly recent focused linguistic intervention, the attempt by feminists to alter or enlarge the stock of personal pronouns and to feminize agent nouns like *chairman* in order to diminish the dominance of the male gender, traditionally upheld in the grammatical dictum that “the male subsumes the female.” Proposals for forms such as *s/he* were successful in raising consciousness, but produced few long-term survivals. Forms like *wimmin* and *herstory* became objects of satire, while the extensive replacement of *man* by *person* aroused some strong reactions: “I resent this ideological intrusion and its insolent dealings with our mother (perhaps I should say ‘parent’) tongue,” wrote Roger Scruton (1990, p. 118). Scruton’s mocking parody “parent tongue” is a response we shall see replicated many times in reactions to politically correct language. Nevertheless, some new forms like *chairperson* and *spokesperson* have managed to establish themselves.

Another comparison can be made with radical political discourse. Communism attempted to establish a whole new ideological discourse by means of neologisms like *proletariate*, semantic extensions like *bourgeois*, and by co-opting words like *imperialist* and *surplus*. Hard-line Communists still call each other “comrade” and refer to “the workers,” “the collective,” “capital,” and the “party line,” terms which are regarded by outsiders (who now form the majority) with irony and humor. For the days and locales when Communists could impose semantic norms on populations have long disappeared.

There are three characteristics which make political correctness a unique sociolinguistic phenomenon. Unlike previous forms of orthodoxy, both religious and political, it is not imposed by some recognized authority like the Papacy, the Politburo, or the Crown, but is a form of semantic engineering and censorship not derivable from one recognized or definable source, but a variety. There is no specific ideology, although it focuses on certain inequalities and disadvantaged people in society and on correcting prejudicial attitudes, more especially on the demeaning words which express them. Politically correct language is the product and formulation of a militant minority which remains mysteriously unlocatable. It is not the spontaneous creation of the speech community, least of all any particular deprived sector of it. Disadvantaged groups, such as the deaf, the blind, or the crippled (to use the traditional vocabulary), do not speak for themselves, but are championed by other influential public voices.

In these respects political correctness has a very different dynamic from the earlier high-profile advocates of, say, feminism or black consciousness in the USA. The feminists of the second wave, such as Germaine Greer, Betty Friedan, Kate Millett, Gloria Steinem, and Susan Sontag, were highly articulate, individual, and outspoken controversialists who did not always agree with each other, characteristics shared by Martin Luther King, Eldridge Cleaver, and Malcolm X. By contrast, the anonymous agenda-manipulators of political correctness are more difficult to identify. These features make the conformity to political correctness the more mysterious.

Paradoxically, political correctness manifested itself rapidly and most strongly, not in political parties, but on university campuses; not in the closed societies of Eastern Europe, but in free Western societies, especially in America, the only country in the world where freedom of speech is a constitutional right. Much play was accordingly made about the rights enshrined in the First Amendment, their “ownership” and their proper application.

In addition to these contemporary issues, it is important to recognize both a historical and a moral dimension, that is, to be aware that political correctness is not an exclusively modern manifestation. Accordingly, it is enlightening to consider some earlier forms of changing orthodoxies and their semantic correlatives, as well as the moral imperatives which these changing orthodoxies have generated. In many ways there has been a continuing dialectic between political orthodoxy and dissent since the sixteenth century, virtually since the invention of printing. Reflection shows that political correctness of one sort or another has been a feature of English society for centuries, certainly since the English Reformation, the first major political change which was not an invasion.

Furthermore, literature illuminates the topic in many fascinating ways. Our greatest dramatist, for instance, wrote some plays which uphold traditional ideas of authority and the Divine Right, but others which interrogate this notion. "Family values" proves another highly problematic concept in his work, for his insights into sibling rivalry are deeply disturbing. Very few love relationships are free of hostility, jealousy, or tragic interference. A good case can be made for the view that from about 1600 Shakespeare seems intentionally to have written plays which deal with irresolvable moral and political problems. Major issues are not buried in the subplot or in speeches of minor characters. No audience could fail to be disturbed or provoked by a whole series of resounding utterances, such as Hamlet's misogynist generalization "Frailty, thy name is woman," or Shylock's question "Hath not a Jew eyes?," or Falstaff's cynical view that "honor" is "a mere word," or by the bastard Edmund's dismissive comment on heredity: "fine word, legitimate!" A mere century later Alexander Pope was to mock "the right divine of kings to govern wrong," while two centuries before Shakespeare, Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales*, created in a supposedly harmonious medieval social setting, contains biting satires of the ecclesiastical establishment and many unexpected expressions of xenophobia, racism, sexism, ageism, and lookism, even vestiges of the class struggle. Part IV accordingly seeks to accommodate these historical and literary dimensions.

In addition, the new South Africa offers a fruitful example of the semantic and social problems of "normalization" after the iniquities of apartheid. The nation has been in a political and social time warp, only recently emerging from the agendas of colonialism, white domination, and racial separation to deal with the issues of democracy, national identity, affirmative action, and various forms of empowerment in a multicultural society. These aspects are covered in this chapter, in chapter 5, and in the Conclusion.

What is Political Correctness?

This fundamental question has become increasingly difficult to answer as new agendas have materialized. Most people would frame answers along the lines of "It means not using words like *nigger*, *queer*, or *cripple*," or "It means showing respect to all," or "It means accepting and promoting diversity." These answers are adequate, but cover only the main issues, by means of proscription (the first) or prescription (the second and third). The emphases on offensive language, prejudiced attitudes, and insulting behavior towards the marginalized are central. The question is less easily answered in a comprehensive way, as the historical précis has suggested. Specific answers are supplied by verbal definition, by identifying role models,

by description of approved or bad practices, or assumptions about proper and improper behavior.

Leaving aside the theoretical and social aspects for the time being, let us briefly consider the epigraphs at the beginning of the book. It is striking that the oldest, from Chaucer's portrait of a medieval nobleman, describes a role model, an ideal of behavior (that of never saying anything disrespectful to anyone, regardless of status) which conforms with the best notions of political correctness. Chaucer evidently regards this aspect of his "verray, parfit gentil knyght" as both admirable and unusual. The exchange from Shakespeare's *Twelfth Night* shows us two very different knights, one idiotic, the other decadent. Although the comedy is set in Illyria, the issue is highly relevant. Sir Andrew Aguecheek's antagonism towards Malvolio as a suspected Puritan ("I'd beat him like a dog") has a contemporary edge of intolerance, which Sir Toby Belch's critical reproof rightly shows to be mindless: "For being a Puritan? Thy exquisite reason, dear knight?" Being tolerant towards the Puritans, who wished to impose their strict religious régime on all, who hated the theaters and eventually succeeded in closing them, required an act of considerable charity. But Sir Toby, for all his faults, has a balanced, *laissez faire* attitude. The kind of sectarian extremism which lay ahead is shown in the scathing references to "Jesuitism, Puritanism and Quaquerism [Quakerism] and of all the Isms from Schism" in the remarkable quotation from 1680. From a different perspective, the quotations from Milton, John Adams, and Justice Holmes show a faith, indeed an insistence, on open debate and in "the principle of free thought," attitudes which are often lacking from modern political and educational forums, a point which Doris Lessing argues strongly. Indeed "free thought" and "free speech" are often seen to be curtailed by political correctness. Dr Johnson's famous dictum reminds us that though "cant" is now largely obsolete as a word, the plausible hypocrisy which it denotes still thrives, and is too often encountered.

The question could be put another way: what do speech codes, Chairman Mao, eating foie gras, the letters of Philip Larkin, *Tintin in the Congo*, George Orwell's *1984*, wearing fur, shock jocks, McCarthyism, Borat, AIDS jokes, Christmas cards, the films of Spike Lee, ethnic slurs, and *The Simpsons* have in common? At first sight, not much. Discussion of these topics will show that political correctness and its obverse, political incorrectness, are more easily recognized than defined, and that both appear in manifold forms.

Yet even this list is by no means exhaustive. A survey of instances culled from the British National Corpus (BNC) shows the phrase being applied to an extraordinary variety of entities, namely to individuals, culture, children's literature, musical bands, the mixture of ethnic groups, even a lasagne, as well as to language. Many of the quotations come from press

reports and analyses, some from book reviews, from novels and interviews. “Politically Correct movies are fairy tales” was an early comment in 1984 by Joel Schumacher, a film producer, in *The Scotsman*. Most of the quotations in the BNC date from the early 1990s, for instance references to “Glenda Jackson, the Politically Correct actress” and to “Politically Correct feminism” (both from the *Daily Telegraph*, 1992). Another report comments: “Politically Correct language was the order of the day at the BASW [British Association of Social Workers] conference as the debates centred on gender issues” (*Community Care*, 1993). An interviewee in the *Daily Express* comments: “I have a very good Politically Correct feminist side and a very glamour-oriented attention-getting whorey side, and they clash.” These last three quotations show an equation of political correctness with feminism, an identification we shall encounter frequently. There is also, in British politics, an assumption that political correctness is a feature of the Left, seen in many quotations, such as: “Labour would preside over the entrenching of Political Correctness in the classroom” (*Daily Telegraph*, 1992). Many similar comments are recorded from 1992, the year of a general election. Socialist assumptions certainly seem to lie behind this item: “Another ruled that a grassy lawn was politically incorrect on the grounds that not all children have gardens” (*The Scotsman*).

Environmental issues appear, but in unexpected places: “Complaining that a recent photograph showed him with an unrecyclable styrofoam coffee cup, he denounced it as ‘politically incorrect’” (*Daily Telegraph*, 1992). Benny Hill is described as “the politically incorrect comedian” (*Punch*, 1992), while an observation is made that “The culture is politically incorrect, so violence gets cheered” (*The Scotsman*). A comment from *Pilot* magazine concludes: “but you have to be politically correct these days!” (1992). Others are less concessive: “Terms such as ‘faggot’ may be unacceptable to polite society, in this age of Political Correctness, but clearly nothing has altered what goes on the privacy of the popular conscience” (*Daily Telegraph*, 1992). In similar tone: “Even in an era of ‘Political Correctness’, and hypersensitivity over racial slights, Eskimo Pie has retained its name and its logo” (*Daily Telegraph*, 1992).

Two reports, both from *The Scotsman* in 1992, relate to children’s literature: “A survey of children’s authors by the writers’ group PEN suggests that publishers are not content merely with encouraging writers to be politically correct, but are actually censoring anything they feel to be politically incorrect.” The second reports: “Indeed publishers told PEN they were under pressure from schools, libraries and local authorities to be politically correct.” This aspect is discussed further under the “Censorship” section below. Fiction is a frequent candidate. “*The First Wives Club* is a very American book . . . in its fashionable Political Correctness: having taken

revenge on their rich, white, middle aged husbands, the ex-wives find true love with, variously, a lesbian, an impoverished Puerto Rican lawyer, and a younger man” (*Daily Telegraph*, 1992). This last comment contains a clearly ironic observation on the “rich, white” husbands getting their just desserts, since the betrayed wives seek adventurous lives outside the bourgeois norms.

These topics are related to the previously listed aspects, namely: political, literary, educational, cultural, gender, and behavioral. Perhaps because many of the instances come from the early 1990s, they do not put much emphasis on later key aspects of political correctness, namely animal rights, colonialism, the environment, and AIDS. Many quotations identify an aspect of political correctness without defining it. It is merely asserted, for example, that various groups “. . . want a Labour win in order to impose Political Correctness” (*Daily Telegraph*, 1992). This practice clearly assumes that even then political correctness was recognizable in some way. We also notice that in all the early instances both “political” and “correctness” are capitalized.

What constitutes politically incorrect behavior? The characterization is not as simple as one would imagine, as the following table of “inappropriate” activities shows. These range from the serious to the trivial, covering linguistic modes, behavioral patterns, and lifestyle choices, and are designated by means of the symbols ✓ (yes) or ✗ (no) or ? (uncertain):

Inappropriate activities	Politically incorrect
using ethnic slurs	✓
religious swearing	✗
sexual swearing	?
pedophilia	✗
rape	✓
chauvinism	✓
sexism	✓
homophobia	✓
pornography	?
blasphemy	✗
racism	✓
domestic violence	?
cruelty to animals	✓
smoking cigarettes	✓
smoking cannabis	✗
wearing fur	✓
eating veal	✓
eating beef	✗

Even granted that the simple categorization of “yes” or “no” is obviously somewhat crude, and that not everybody would agree with all the allocations, the degree of inconsistency is extraordinary. It shows a feature which we shall encounter in different categories and locales, that of double or variable standards. Thus in the category of swearing, only ethnic slurs qualify unambiguously. Religious swearing generally does not: a recent survey showed that the name of Jesus was familiar to the majority of British children, but as a swearword. Sexual swearing is divided along gender lines: *bitch*, *cow*, and *cunt* definitely qualify, although not in all cases, while *fucker*, *bugger*, and *prick* do not. Indeed, the British celebrity chefs Jamie Oliver and Gordon Ramsay, especially notorious for his copious use of the word *fuck*, have achieved royal recognition. Feminists regard pornography as demeaning to women; most males do not. Under the category of blasphemy, *The Life of Brian* (1979) and *Jerry Springer: The Opera* (2005), grossly satirizing the life of Jesus, provoked protests, but not banning. Rejecting a subsequent appeal by Christian Voice against the Springer show, the Law Lords ruled that the appeal “does not raise an arguable point of law of general public importance” (*The Times*, March 5, 2008). Less comprehensible was the attempt to invoke the blasphemy law against Salman Rushdie’s *The Satanic Verses* (1989), discussed further in chapter 5 under “Islam.” It failed on the grounds that the law covers only Christianity, its personages and articles of belief. While it is understandable that homophobia should be regarded as politically incorrect, it seems extraordinary that pedophilia is not, certainly not with the same detestation. And where to place treason? Who knows?

A number of the listed “inappropriate activities” are illegal; some are merely bad manners. But their correlation with what is regarded as politically incorrect is not simple. Thus smoking in nondesignated areas or using ethnic slurs are punishable by law. Similarly, religious swearing or farting in company are unacceptable breaches of manners or decorum. Political correctness occupies a behavioral space between the two. As has been mentioned, it inculcates a sense of obligation to conform in some areas (such as chauvinism or wearing fur) which, some would argue, should be matters of choice. This creates problems in a free society. At the same time, no one is obliged to be politically correct. Consequently, charges of censorship or fascism, which are often made, have to be analyzed closely.

Definitions

It is customary to answer the broader question with a definition. Here is a selection:

Conformity to a body of liberal or radical opinion on social matters, characterized by the advocacy of approved views and the rejection of language and behaviour considered discriminatory or offensive. (*Oxford Dictionary of New Words*, 1997)

The most powerful mental tyranny in what we call the free world is Political Correctness, which is both immediately evident, and to be seen everywhere, and as invisible as a kind of poison gas, for its influences are often far from the source, manifesting as a general intolerance. (Doris Lessing, 2004)

Political Correctness is a concept invented by hard-rightwing forces to defend their right to be racist, to treat women in a degrading way and to be truly vile about gay people. They invent these people who are Politically Correct, with a rigid, monstrous attitude to life so they can attack them. But we have all had to learn to modify our language. That's all part of being a human being. (Clare Short, *Guardian*, February 18, 1995)

As we can see here, and will see further in the argument, especially in chapter 2 and in Part II, there are various modes of definition. The first of these is authoritative and neutral, while the second and third are combative or tactical. Simply in terms of semantics, the first authority gives a balanced, referential account, using the key term “conformity,” while the second and third use the rhetorical strategy of highly emotive terms like “powerful mental tyranny,” “a kind of poison gas,” “hard-rightwing forces,” “truly vile,” and so on. Their subtext is of a war going on. Yet on closer examination, the first definition fudges the issue in various ways, by using “liberal or radical,” which have very different meanings, particularly in Britain and America; it also contains a series of begged questions arising from the terms *conformity*, *approved*, and *considered* – without identifying by whom.

Ideologically, the second and third explanations are, of course, diametrically opposed. Lessing derives political correctness from left-wing conformity which has bred “tyranny” and “general intolerance”; Short from a cynical right-wing stalking horse, “invented” to discredit liberal attitudes (*liberal* in the British sense of broad-minded, unprejudiced). But neither can truly identify the source, what Lessing in her previously cited quotation called “the party” and the “vigilantes” or what Short calls the “hard-rightwing forces,” to whom they attribute this curious sociolinguistic phenomenon.

The two explanations are not, however, mutually exclusive, in that a strict form of orthodoxy may be initially acceptable to its hard-line followers, then be satirized by outsiders, and finally come to be denounced by the majority as an intolerant infringement of personal liberty. Thus Puritanism, often compared with political correctness, began as a worthy

reformist spiritual and doctrinal position within Christianity, before it became increasingly intolerant, satirized, and even regarded as un-Christian. Of many ironic quotations, this by the American Finley Peter Dunne on Thanksgiving (from *Mr Dooley's Opinions*, 1901) is one of the sharpest: "Twas founded be [by] the Puritans to give thanks f'r being presarved fr'm the Indyans, and we keep it to give thanks we are presarved fr'm the Puritans." Lessing traces the development of political correctness as being similar to that of Puritanism:

This began as a sensitive, honest and laudable attempt to remove the racial and sexual biases encoded in language, but it was at once taken over by the political hysterics, who made of it another dogma. . . . There could hardly be a conversation without it, and PC was used as often as the Victorians used "It isn't done", meaning socially improper, or to bolster the orthodoxies of "received opinion", or even to criticise the eccentric. (Lessing, 2004, p. 76)

"Fascism" has followed the same semantic pattern, being transformed from its strict Italian political origins to its broader sense of dictatorship and conformity. Roger Scruton has a notable essay on the topic in *Untimely Tracts* (1987). Today both "Puritan" and "Fascist" are, of course, highly critical terms. Paul Johnson defined political correctness as "liberal fascism" (cited in Kramer and Kimball, 1995, p. xii).

How adequate are the definitions so far offered? They are accurate, but only up to a point. What is obviously noteworthy about all of them is their lack of reference to what is really the most obvious semantic fact about political correctness, namely the emergence of a whole new series of artificial substitutions, some of them already listed, terms such as *abled*, *herstory*, *lookism*, *phallogentric*, *waitron*, and *wimmin*. Many other established terms, such as *challenged*, *Eurocentric*, *gay*, *homophobic*, *patriarchy*, and *person* have been given new meanings in the furtherance of particular agendas. Typically, politically correct language avoids judgmental terms, preferring an artificial currency of polysyllabic abstract euphemistic substitutions. Thus *drug addiction* is avoided, the preferred opaque formula being *substance dependence*; *visually impaired* is preferred to *blind*, while *sex worker* is the politically correct term for *prostitute*. Although *cripple* and *spastic* have become taboo, some formulas, such as *differently abled* for *disabled* have proved too artificial to gain real currency.

What is characteristic about the language? A detailed semantic analysis of the word field is to be found in chapter 4, while individual topics and forms are discussed under the various relevant headings in Part III. But in essence the language is unfamiliar and abstract, using high register classical

elements (*phallocratic*, *heterosexism*) to an unusual degree and comparatively few native Anglo-Saxon terms. Even these appear in odd combinations like *fattist* and *lookism*. In essence it is a code language, with most of the forms, both the new (*herstory*, to *Bork*) and even the apparently familiar (*disadvantaged*, *challenged*) requiring translation and explanation of their agenda.

In addition to the semantic problems, the grammatical structure is noteworthy for its oddness. William Safire rightly observed that the most frequently used linguistic form was the “adverbially premodified adjectival lexical unit” (*New York Times*, May 5, 1991). This slightly cumbersome but accurate description perhaps contains a tinge of irony. A great number of the formulas of political correctness (e.g., *politically correct* itself, *physically challenged*, *visually impaired*, and *differently abled*) follow the same grammatical structure. Most seem unnatural for various reasons: they are abstract, imprecise, and euphemistic. However, the structure itself is not unusual: thus “financially sound” is an established phrase describing a company or institution. But *financially underprivileged* is problematic because there is a semantic mismatch: *underprivileged* does not normally qualify a financial situation. There is also the literal implication that being rich is a privilege, which is not valid, being true only of those who inherit wealth. The phrase has come about simply as one of the many euphemisms for “poor.” Similarly, *physically strong* describes a person in ordinary terms, but *differently abled* is logically an absurdity and a tautology, since people obviously differ in ability. Here the problem is compounded by unfamiliarity: *differently* is not normally used as a premodifier, and *abled* is a comparative neologism, recorded only from 1981.

What do these formulas mean? The real problem with all of them, as with most euphemisms, is that we do not know how disabled or poor these unfortunate people are, let alone what they feel about being called “abled,” “challenged,” and so on. This kind of semantic innovation is not truly traditional or idiomatic, thereby provoking objections and satire. We shall be returning to the issues of euphemism and satire in due course.

The Semantic Problems of Political Correctness

In essence, the political correctness debate has been about naming, or rather renaming. Typically outsiders are named and labeled, whether they be foreigners, the colonized, minorities, homosexuals, cripples, or the mad, to use the older vocabulary. The primary intentions of the interventions of political correctness were laudable, as all agree, namely to change

ingrained prejudicial attitudes and their semantic correlatives by the introduction of new, neutral, and unfamiliar lexical forms. In tandem there were moves to denounce and diminish the currency of established demeaning vocabulary. These worthy initiatives were obviously not expressed on a *tabula rasa*, since, as many studies have shown, in crucial respects language is not neutral, but a reflection of dominant ideologies, unhealthy prejudices, and limited notions of normality. Centuries of bias have become established, even entrenched, in prejudicial and stereotypical language evident in terms for women, as well as the groups mentioned above. The more insulting of these terms are demotic and low in register: *bitch*, *queer*, *wog*, *loony*, and *spastic* are just some examples. Over time these have gained established currencies in the ordinary language of the street, in some literature, and in dictionary entries.

The attempt to reformulate such expressions in more neutral language of a higher register appropriate to public discourse, admirable though the motives were, has not received wholesale endorsement. After a period of initial acceptance, reactions ranged from measured criticism to outright hostility, ironic parody, and scornful rejection. There have simultaneously emerged various genres and figures in popular culture, notably rappers and “shock jocks,” who in various ways express views and use language which is blatant in its political incorrectness. In addition there have appeared semiserious and quite substantial anthologies of common and uncommon insults, such as Jonathon Green’s *Big Book of Being Rude* (2000), which focuses on personal insults, and Julian L’Estrange’s *Big Book of Insults* (2002) which contains a wealth of xenophobic (and anti-British) material. Whether these contrary tendencies are phases in a cultural model of thesis and antithesis remains to be seen. But the reaction of those whom Stanley Fish calls “the backlashers” (1994, p. 11) is disturbing, and can be explained by the model discussed below under the subsection “Semantic frameworks.”

The principal topics involved in renaming are dealt with in Part III. Here we are concerned with the formula *political correctness* itself, rather than the historical dimension of earlier regimes requiring conformity and orthodoxy. The formulation is fairly modern. As with many formulas, *political correctness* originally had quite a clear literal sense in a limited context, referring to the orthodox Communist party political line. Since then it has broadened in its applications and has also acquired meanings that are different from those of its individual component terms. These developments are not surprising in themselves. Let us compare two other set phrases of a social character, namely *free enterprise* and *industrial action*. We note that although *enterprise* and *free* have a wider range of meanings, *free enterprise*

generally means what it says, within its capitalist framework. By contrast *industrial action*, in the UK, means something quite different from the general meanings of *industrial* and *action*: it is a euphemism or code term for *strike*.

We have seen earlier in the discussion that even serviceable definitions, such as that in the *Oxford Dictionary of New Words* (1997) turn out to be problematic or inadequate. In essence this is because the formula *political correctness* is an inherently problematic semantic construct. In the first place, there is no such thing as a “correct political attitude,” for various reasons. *Politics* is by any definition a diversified term covering a wide spectrum of activities going far beyond affairs of state and government to include local politics, office politics, family politics, marital politics, sexual politics, identity politics, and so on. We are virtually in the realm of the Marxist interpretation which sees politics in everything. Furthermore, outside the confines of totalitarian societies, no one political system or party can claim to be “correct.” Even within major political parties, there are “moderates,” “hardliners,” and “extremists.” *Correctness*, by contrast, denotes conformity to certain agreed standards or practices. Consequently, *political correctness* does not have an agreed, clear literal meaning, in the way that *grammatical correctness* or *political corruption* do.

The origins and evolution of these three formulas essentially reflect the degree of their accepted meanings in the speech community. *Free enterprise* has been in the language for over two centuries, but it took about a century for the modern capitalist sense to emerge. Since its meaning has developed naturally and gradually by consensus in the public domain, it is largely undisputed, even though there may be arguments about the desirable degrees of freedom within capitalism. *Industrial action*, on the other hand, is an artificial bureaucratic coinage dating from only around 1971, designed largely as a substitute formula to avoid the negative connotations of *strike*, the natural and common word. It is not only a euphemism; it is a misnomer, meaning essentially, industrial inaction. Consequently, although it has an official currency, it is generally regarded as an example of cynical double-speak and is thus seldom used in ordinary discourse. One cannot imagine a man saying to his mate in the pub: “We can’t go to the cricket because of the industrial action on the trains.” It is also essentially British in currency: foreigners and visitors would need a translation.

The history of *political correctness* is more complex, first emerging in Communist terminology as a policy concept denoting the orthodox party line of Chinese Communism as enunciated by Mao Tse-Tung in the 1930s. This we may call the hard political or literal sense. It was then borrowed

by the American New Left in the 1960s, but with a more rhetorical than strictly programmatic sense, before becoming adopted and current in Britain. It is essentially a modern coinage by a minority, deriving from *politically correct*, dating from about 1970. The semantic history is treated in detail in chapter 2 in the section “Origins of the Phrase.”

Euphemisms: traditional, institutional and contrived

Euphemism is clearly the closest semantic relation, since all the classic formulations of political correctness show avoidance of direct reference to some embarrassing topic or condition. These go far beyond the traditional topics and modes of euphemism including, for example, *disadvantaged*, *substance abuse*, *demographics*, *differently abled*, and *vertically challenged*. Euphemism and other forms of verbal sanitization have a long history and typically take two semantic forms: the metaphorical use of root terms (*pass water* instead of *piss* and *break wind* instead of *fart*), or the substitution of so-called “Anglo-Saxon” words by polysyllabic abstract formulations using classical vocabulary, well described by Edward Gibbon as “the decent obscurity of a learned language” (*Decline and Fall*, chap. 30). Examples range from *terminated pregnancy* instead of *abortion*, *erectile dysfunction* for *impotence*, through to *liquidate*, *neutralize*, or *terminate with extreme prejudice* instead of *kill*. While the first examples are natural and have a long history in the speech community, the latter are more institutional, recent, unfamiliar, and “Orwellian” in the sense of disguising the violence and ugliness of war by means of bland abstraction. Some, like *pacification* for “subject to new tyranny” (an actual Orwellian coinage) show the added refinement of meaning virtually the opposite of their apparent sense, a feature we have noted in *industrial action*.

Significantly, Michel Bréal, the founding figure of semantics, noted in his seminal work over a century ago that words often “come to possess a disagreeable sense as a result of euphemism” (1900, p. 100). This is, of course, an ironic outcome, since the intention of euphemism is precisely to avoid “the disagreeable sense.” The point is that euphemisms seldom remain euphemisms over time, but become tainted by association with what they seek to disguise. Otto Jespersen, another great historian of the language, observed in 1905: “This is the usual destiny of euphemisms; in order to avoid the real name of what is thought indecent or improper, people use some innocent word. But when that becomes habitual in this sense it becomes just as objectionable as the word it has ousted and now is rejected in its turn” (1962, p. 230). Bréal also presciently perceived the results of “false delicacy” in sensitive areas:

We remember what a noble signification *amant* and *maitresse* still possessed in Corneille [1606–84]. But they are dethroned, as was *Buhle* in German. Here we see the inevitable results of false delicacy; honourable names are dishonoured by being given to things which are dishonourable. (Bréal, 1900, p. 101)

This perception was taken further by the semanticist Stephen Ullmann, who argued that “the notorious deterioration which has affected various words for ‘girl’ or ‘woman’ . . . was no doubt due to genuine or pseudo-euphemism” (1964, pp. 90–1). Ullmann’s valuable term *pseudo-euphemism* is a more technical version of Bréal’s “false delicacy.” They can be seen in copious examples, such as *lady of the night* or *fille de joie* for “prostitute,” the more poetic antecedents of the politically correct industrial term *sex-worker*. Indeed, both “false delicacy” and “pseudo-euphemism” are very apt descriptions of much of the terminology of political correctness.

Euphemism is a genuine collective attempt to avoid an embarrassing topic that often becomes undermined by association, whereas pseudo-euphemism typically betrays certain elements of humorous connivance and irony. Thus to say “Snooks is a bit slow on the uptake” is a euphemism, whereas to say “Snooks is two cards short of a full house” is a pseudo-euphemism. Pseudo-euphemism draws attention to itself by being maliciously clever: thus “slow on the uptake” is an established phrase, a variation of “slow-witted,” whereas “two cards short of a full house” is a creative variation of a fertile new idiom discussed further under “Disability” in chapter 6.

Both modes are well established. Thus the ironic phrase “lick [i.e., touch] of the tar brush” is included by Francis Grose in his inimitable slang dictionary, *A Classical Dictionary of the Vulgar Tongue* (1785), explaining another euphemism, *blue skin*: “A person begotten on a black woman by a white man.” Also in Grose are *love begotten child*: a bastard, *mother*: a prostitute, *mother of all saints*: the monosyllable (a code word for *cunt*), *unfortunate women*: prostitutes, and *a lady of easy virtue*. *Sapphic* was an early pseudo-euphemism for *lesbian*; it has now become institutionalized. However, all euphemisms, precisely because they are not literal, are code terms or phrases depending on tacit or mutual understandings. An outsider will not grasp all the nuances: hence there is always a possibility of confusion. This increases when euphemisms are contrived artificially and given a new, limited currency by a particular pressure group, as has happened with political correctness.

The focus of euphemisms has, of course, changed from universals such as death, disease, sex, bodily functions, madness, the names of God and the Devil, to being crippled, being poor, being fired, being fat, or having

a humble occupation. As this list shows, euphemisms cannot be entirely avoided, since *bodily functions* and *having a humble occupation* are euphemisms in themselves. Some readers will feel that *crippled* should be replaced by *disabled*. Race is a burgeoning new area of euphemism: political commentators and journalists increasingly prefer general terms like *demographic change*, *immigrant*, *minority*, *origin*, or *background* to specific markers like *black* or *Asian*. It is significant that a fairly comprehensive *Dictionary of Euphemisms* (1983) by Neaman and Silver covered all the traditional topics, including “Bureaucratese” and “The Game of War,” but not race. Today some journalistic codes and house rules forbid the mention of race in news stories about crime or violence. The number of euphemisms which grows up round a particular topic is an obvious indication of its power to embarrass: thus there are no euphemisms for “color,” only for “people of color.” The issue of race is taken up in more detail in Part III.

Long ago H. L. Mencken, the frank but controversial authority on what he called *The American Language* (1919–36), observed the American habit of dignifying menial occupations by means of grand titles: “The American seldom believes that the trade he follows is quite worthy of his virtues and talents . . . and even invents a sonorous name to set himself off from the herd” (1963, p. 339). His numerous examples included *exterminating engineer* and *rodent operative* for *rat-catcher*. Although Mencken called these “Occupational Euphemisms,” and like most observers treated these restylings with his typical ironic humor, they are not typical euphemisms in the manner of *excrement*, *intimacy*, and *molest*, since in many cases the object or calling is not unpleasant or embarrassing as such. They can be seen in another light, as attempts by those in the lower echelons of trade to be regarded with egalitarian dignity. Equality and dignity are, of course, two key watchwords of political correctness, and it is thus not surprising that this semantic tendency has become so highly developed in the United States.

Today we are used to Orwellian substitutions such as ministries of war being called ministries of peace, ministries of labour being restyled ministries of productivity, and so on. In some cases the new politically correct names are justified: perhaps “correctional services” is a more accurate name for the enterprise than plain old gloomy “prisons.” Yet historically the substitution of names as a bureaucratic subterfuge is not new. In the Prologue to an ancient morality play the figure of Avarice announces: “I will my name disguise; And call my name Policy instead of Covetise.” The point is that *policy* was and is a respectable, albeit vague term, while *covetise* was the name of a deadly sin, archaically known as Covetousness. The play

was *Respublica*, dated 1553. Semantic substitutions were not entirely new even then, as the history of *purveyor* reveals. In the fourteenth century purveyors became notorious for not paying for goods commandeered in the king's name. The solution was simple: a statute of 1360 required them to pay up on delivery and changed their designation, so that "the odious title of purveyor shall be changed and styled purchaser" ("le heignous noun de pourveyour soit chaungé & nommé achatour").

These are extreme and cynical examples. In general, euphemisms come from many sources, but in essence they have grown up spontaneously in the speech community. They remind us of the complex relationship between *politics* and *politeness*, in that while to do what is *politic* or *expedient* may involve a questionable or even detestable compromise in the public domain, it may be the right thing to do in personal, family, or group relations. When Aristotle defined Man as being "a political animal," he meant essentially that he lives in a society or social organism, the *polis*, not solitary like a wild animal. Euphemisms obviously exist in great numbers and in many varieties. But fundamentally and naturally they spring from an impulse not to embarrass, which could be claimed as a prime motivation for political correctness.

Ideals, Ideology, and Practice

Political correctness is based on various idealistic assumptions on how society should be run, and how people should behave towards each other. However, a society is necessarily made up of individuals and groups, with different histories, manners, cultures, needs, and expectations. Furthermore, the two societies with which we are mainly concerned, the United States and Britain, are essentially multicultural, as opposed to say, Japan. America was multicultural from the beginning, although the political history has generally emphasized the interests of the white race. The British Isles previously contained the Anglo-Saxon heptarchy and the kingdoms of the Picts, the Scots, and the Irish, subsequently evolving into four independent nations: although the political concept of "Great Britain," dating from 1704, gave a nominal sense of national unity, there were numerous minorities. The arrival of Commonwealth immigrants from the late 1950s was the beginning of a radical social change. In many ways the impulse behind political correctness in its essential sense of respect derives from an awareness of multiculturalism.

The primary idealistic assumption is that of equality. This is stronger in the American ideology, underpinned by the proposition that "All men are

created equal” (in the Declaration of Independence, 1776) than in the British political scheme, which has no written constitution; accommodates monarchy, ranks of nobility, and a class system, admits deference, accepting the more realistic and practical notion that all are equal before the law. A major problem, as always, is how to achieve “equality,” that is, to redress historical inequalities, at a particular moment in time.

Yet historical fact and ideology do not always square. Thus slavery was entrenched at the time of Independence (there were already some 500,000 slaves in America), but the word *slave* is not mentioned in the Declaration or the Constitution. The institution remained in force until 1865, having become a major cause of the ruinous Civil War. The iniquity of slavery, discussed further in Part III, obviously has its legacy in the continuing inequalities in the status of American blacks, creating problems of rectification, reparation, and so on. Furthermore, those who are now called Native Americans were characterized in the Declaration as “the merciless Indian Savages.”

Another governing assumption is that of representativity in gender and race, in administration, in major public forums, even in national sporting teams. This may lead to contrived forms of social engineering such as tokenism and quotas. In some cases, such as in South Africa, these and other measures are designed to compensate for the social engineering of apartheid. Problematically, assumptions of representativity militate against both the criteria of democratic choice in politics and that of talent or merit in business, administration, and sport. Arguments such as “It’s time America had a woman/black president” are grounded in the assumption of representativity. Few would argue on the same basis: “It’s time America had a truly representative basketball team,” that is, with four white players and one black. However, in South Africa such arguments are commonly retailed in politics and in those sports historically dominated by the white minority, such as rugby and cricket. Quotas have become a highly contentious issue. Programs of affirmative action obviously derive from the ideals of representativity and reparations for historical disadvantage, but are problematic in their implementation, since they are often seen as “reverse discrimination.”

Most problematic are assumptions of conformity, since political correctness seeks to establish new norms in dignified address and to suppress established prejudicial practices. This is an understandable and entirely worthy enterprise, especially in its aim to confer at least dignity on all. The treatment of the individual with respect is relatively easy to manage; the problem arises when conformity is expected in political matters. Even such rituals as the oath of allegiance in the United States have provoked objections. Furthermore, norms turn out to be historically unstable, in view of social, political, and religious changes in societies. Assumptions of conformity are

tenable only in highly regulated or totalitarian societies, being inimical to free democracies, even for the best of motives.

Revealingly, the modern field of entertainment proves to be highly complex in terms of representativity. In the US a double standard generally prevails. Thus American television police series are commonly politically correct in that detective teams are invariably representative, with broad quotas both in terms of race and gender. So, in the main, are hospital series and soap operas. Sitcoms, on the other hand, are commonly unracial, appealing to a particular group. *Cosby*, *Two and Half Men*, *Jamie Foxx*, *George Lopez*, and *Sex and the City* are the most obvious examples. The same is true of drama series such as *Desperate Housewives* and *The Orange County*. In the UK, by contrast, most entertainment, being aimed at a predominantly white audience, has had a predominance of white actors and preoccupations. Differences are based more on class and region. The list includes *Coronation Street*, *EastEnders*, *Porridge*, *Absolutely Fabulous*, *Class Act*, *One Foot in the Grave*, *Yes Minister*, *Yes Prime Minister* and *Men Behaving Badly*. In recent years there have been some attempts to introduce elements of multiculturalism. However, racial exclusivity does not prevent some series from being politically incorrect. An apparent exception like *The Kumars at No 42* actually trades on the cast's Indian origins as well as their assimilation and difference from the white mainstream. Alternative US cartoon series such *The Simpsons* and *South Park* and adult UK printed comics like *Viz* are most daringly politically incorrect. These issues are dealt with more fully under the section on "Popular Culture" in chapter 8.

Once the issue of awards arises, arguments of representativity often emerge with force, especially in America. Thus for many years there has been presurizing publicity that it was time for black actors to win Oscars, even though the issue was supposedly one of merit, decided by the members of the Motion Picture Academy of America. The Booker Prize, on the other hand, open to British and Commonwealth authors, has provoked no such controversy, with winners of all hues and backgrounds over the years. The Nobel Prize for Literature has often been criticized in recent decades for making awards considered politically correct in the sense of favoring authors critical of repressive regimes. The complex relationship between Literature and Ideology is covered in chapter 8.

Orthodoxy in Religion and Politics

Political correctness can be related to much earlier kinds of conformity engineered by pressure groups requiring compliance to particular values or

definitions. As we have seen, linguistically it is a form of *euphemism* rooted in various social agendas, while politically it can be seen as a new form of *orthodoxy*, a term which has its roots in ethics and religion. Indeed, the *Random House Webster's College Dictionary* (1991) defined *political correctness* as "marked by or adhering to a typically progressive orthodoxy on issues involving especially race, gender, sexual affinity, or ecology." This is an excellent definition, but both *orthodox* and *orthodoxy* are traditionally and almost by definition conservative in meaning, and thus the conjunction with *progressive* is unusual. Furthermore, in cultural matters political correctness has involved not just seeking to establish a new orthodoxy, but in jettisoning and stigmatizing established cultural norms and "the canon" as Eurocentric, outdated, elitist, and chauvinist. These developments have provoked controversy and opposition to what has been called "liberal orthodoxy" (Kramer and Kimball, 1995, p. xii).

Historically, societies typically evolve through cycles whereby one orthodoxy becomes dominant, then declines through being discredited or contaminated, before being replaced by another. Both Vico and Oswald Spengler demonstrated this thesis at length. The ecclesiastical history of England in all its complexity and confusion shows such oscillations of values in eras of conformity and denunciation, as different power groups have established their authority. Oscillations of régime and values obviously make political correctness a highly relative notion. Thus what was politically correct in England in 1640 (under Charles I, leading up to the crisis of the Civil War) changed entirely in 1650 (under the Cromwellian or Puritan Commonwealth) and changed again in 1660 with the Restoration of the monarchy under Charles II. The English Civil War was described by the Earl of Clarendon, a royalist, from his semantic perspective as *The History of the Great Rebellion in England* (1704–7). Similarly, in the US the Civil War was also known as the War of Rebellion (the Southerners being the rebels) and the War of Secession. Günter Grass's *The Tin Drum* (1959) is a searingly ironic view of oscillating loyalties in wartime Germany.

A key concept in this topic is dogma. As de Tocqueville shrewdly observed: "Catholicism is like an absolute monarchy" (*Democracy in America*, 1835, chapter xvii). Political correctness evolved in a highly dogmatic political system, that of Chinese Communism. In general Communism set out to destroy its great rival, dogmatic religion, by discrediting it as "the opium of the people" and setting up its own hierarchy and belief system. Thus Lenin or Chairman Mao became the equivalent of the Pope, the Politburo became the equivalent of the College of Cardinals, dissident elements were subjected to inquisitions, excommunicated, or purged as "counter-revolutionaries," while those who made extreme sacrifices

were elevated to the level of secular saints: they were the Stakhanovites, who excelled not by faith, but by extraordinary feats of productivity.

Often orthodoxies are established by means of various code words, which in turn have become mere shibboleths. The semantic history of *shibboleth* itself forms a revealing footnote. It was originally a password mentioned in the Old Testament (Judges 12: 4–6) whereby the Gileadites could identify themselves and especially target the Ephraimites, outsiders who could not pronounce the sound *sh*. In that context it was a matter of life and death. It has since come to mean a passé code word, phrase, or entrenched formula regarded as identifying or betraying a person's social background or political allegiance. The sense of a test word, watchword, or slogan of a political party, class, and so on dates from as far back as 1638.

Protestantism and Puritanism are two important movements in English political and ecclesiastical history that are illuminating and germane to the development of political correctness. English Protestantism initially offered liberation from papal authority, but then assumed a form of enforced political correctness in the form of an oath of loyalty to Henry VIII. The crisis of conscience created by this requirement is treated further under the section on “The Reformation” in chapter 7. Oaths of allegiance are still required of British Members of Parliament to the Queen and by American citizens to the United States and to the national flag.

Puritanism, which has had a longer history in America than in Britain, has considerable and enduring relevance to political correctness, since it encapsulates strictness in morality with a Pharisaic attitude of being “holier than thou,” combined with an unhealthy curiosity, even an inquisitiveness or inquisitorial attitude concerning the “lapses” and “nonconformity” of others. Not for nothing has political correctness been stigmatized as the New Puritanism. It was this mind-set which Judge Louis D. Brandeis had in mind when he commented that “The greatest dangers to liberty lurk in insidious encroachment by men of zeal, well-meaning but without understanding” (quoted in Ravitch, 2003, p. 3). The mental attitude can be seen in this personal advertisement: “Professor Leftist . . . but tired of clichés, sloppy thinking and PC holier-than thou-ism” (*New York Review of Books*, March 27, 1995). Here one senses that genuine Puritan fervor has been diluted to posturing and attitudinizing.

The Founding Fathers (to use the traditional chauvinist formula) wisely enacted prohibitions against religious orthodoxy, seeking to avoid the fanaticism and its consequent horrors which Massachusetts had suffered in the Salem witch hunt. Yet an enlightened Constitution did not prevent the evil of slavery, the essentially Puritan social control of alcohol by Prohibition, or the fanaticism of the Communist witch hunt.

Semantic and Lexical Changes

Symbiotic, mediated and “Orwellian” changes

We have seen that political correctness is expressed by both a range of new terms and new meanings applied to established words. Putting these developments in historical context, *semantic change* refers to the change of meaning undergone by words over time, while *lexical change* refers to alterations in the word stock of the language. Because of the complex social history of England, both kinds of change are widely evident in the evolution of the vocabulary. Comparatively few words have shown no change of denotation or connotation over time. However, the reasons for the changes have themselves shifted from being originally symbiotic, then mediated, and finally Orwellian. There are hundreds of such changes, many of them treated in my study *Words in Time* (1988).

Symbiotic change refers to semantic and lexical changes that reflect changed realities, such as conquests, or changes in values. Thus as the feudal class structure broke down, so imported French terms like *gentle* and *noble*, which originally meant “well-born” and were thus class-bound, became less exclusive. The secularization of society is also reflected in words like *office* and *sanction*, both originally ecclesiastical, becoming generalized. The evolution of capitalism is reflected in *fee* and *purchase*, both originally general in meaning, becoming exclusively monetary terms. Four centuries ago when monarchy was well established, *democracy* and *politician* had negative senses, while *aristocracy* literally meant “rule by the best.” With the change to the democratic ethos, *democracy* and *politician* have clearly ameliorated, the first more than the second, while *aristocracy* has deteriorated. Prior to the Reform Bill in 1832, both *radical* and *reform* were largely negative terms: on July 17, 1819 George Cruikshank produced a savage cartoon depicting Reform as a monster with the caption “Universal Suffrage or the Scum Uppermost.” The little word *cell* has managed to traverse an amazing range of meanings over the past millennium, reflecting different power structures: monastic, punitive, correctional, scientific, political, and technical. All these changes were essentially spontaneous, not organized.

Mediated changes are brought about by vested interests exploiting the power of the media to introduce new words or new meanings. Thus soon after its invention the printing press was brought into play in the controversies of the Reformation, generating multitudinous pamphlets, many attacking Catholics and Catholicism, using terms such as *papist*, *popery*, *papistical*, *popeling*, and *popestant*. These critical terms were coined in a mere 40 years, between 1521 and 1561: the last three did not outlive this

period of sectarian abuse. Semantic interventions and coinages by interest groups like political parties also generated stigmatic terms like *Whig* and *Tory* (both from c. 1646), followed by the more respectable labels *Conservative* (1832) and *Labour* (1900).

Orwellian changes are the most drastic, achieved by using the whole propaganda machinery of the modern state to generate new terms or to impose new meanings on words. These changes have the least relation to reality. A prime example is *liberation*, which in its “Orwellian” senses means the opposite of its accepted sense. Although “Orwellian” is usually equated with “totalitarian,” since *Nineteen Eighty-Four* (1949) was a dystopia clearly based on Communism, Orwellian semantic changes are also found in the free world. Thus in the context of the Vietnam War, *pacification* came to be defined as “a process (usually a military operation) designed to secure the peaceful co-operation of a population” (*OED*). In the same military context, *air support* became a standard euphemism for “bombing.”

However, there is a complicating development whereby positive value terms can surface when the social quality they describe is perceived to be passing away. Thus the value of the family as a social institution has been an obvious feature in nearly all societies, regardless of how *family* is defined. Indeed, the value of the family is so obvious that one cannot imagine, let alone find, instances in, say, Defoe or Dickens extolling *family values* in those terms. But the formula is in fact a recent sociosemantic development, recorded from about 1916, and its currency, predominantly American, has increased precisely over a period when the model of the traditional close family unit or “nuclear family” has actually been in decline, together with its assumed qualities of maintaining moral standards and discipline. In addition, *family values* has become a code political term implying a conservative political outlook.

Where do the semantic and lexical changes of political correctness fit in to this tripartite scheme? Virtually all of them are mediated: words like *abled*, *waitron*, and *wimmin* had no semantic history prior to their induction into the vocabulary of political correctness; others like *multicultural*, *homophobic*, and *challenged* were recycled in new senses. Furthermore, words like *addict*, *alcoholic*, and *cripple*, which had developed negative symbiotic changes, were suppressed and replaced by euphemisms. The following sections show further examples of mediated changes.

Semantic frameworks

From a social and political perspective, the initiatives of political correctness can be compared in broad terms with previous systemic attempts to

change social attitudes and values. For instance, Protestantism involved accepting a new politicoreligious hierarchy, its values and keywords, while rejecting, ridiculing, or outlawing those of Catholicism. A similar dynamic can be seen in relation to the adoption of Communism and feminism. However, once Protestantism was espoused and championed by Henry VIII, it became essentially an institutional or “top-down” innovation, whereas the other initiatives derived from pressure groups. Consequently, the mediated semantic innovations of Protestantism were accepted and became institutionalized, while in tandem hostile terms relating to Catholicism became entrenched. By contrast, the degree of acceptance of the other programs and their keywords has varied in the wider community.

National attitudes towards Communism have varied radically since 1848, the “year of revolutions” in Europe, which also saw the publication of the *Communist Manifesto* by Marx and Engels. The philosophy became acceptable in much of Europe and politically obligatory in Russia, but it has never been accepted in Britain. The American Communist Party was founded in 1919, but was essentially outlawed by a variety of legislation, leading to the great McCarthyite Communist witch hunt. In the meantime Moral Re-Armament, the revivalist spiritual organization founded by Frank Buchman in 1938, had developed an anti-Communist agenda publicized by the slogan “Godless Communism.”

In the build-up to World War II, Communism was increasingly regarded as unpatriotic in America, where both *Communist* and *commie* took on the senses of “enemy” and “traitor.” The odd stereotypic idiom “to see Commies under the bed” is recorded in a letter of 1940. But much earlier, in 1933, Jack Warner denounced leaders of the striking Hollywood Screen Writers Guild as “communists” and “radical bastards” while his brother Harry chimed in with “You goddamn Communist bastards!” (Behlmer, 1985, pp. 9–10). Semantic correlatives included *fellow traveler* from 1936 and *card-carrying* from 1948: “The most dangerous Communists . . . today are not the open, avowed, card-carrying party members,” claimed Bert Andrews (1948, p. 96). Whereas *sympathy* and *sympathetic* are positive terms, *sympathizer* has always been used for politically incorrect activities, such as in *Communist sympathizer* and *Nazi sympathizer*. Thus in capitalist societies it makes no sense to call someone a *capitalist sympathizer*, although the designation could be used ironically of one who is supposed to be a socialist, as in “Tony Blair is a capitalist sympathizer.”

The frameworks set out in Tables 1.1 and 1.2 also seek to illustrate the dynamic concerning social outsiders, conceived or constructed from religious, racial, or sexual perspectives. The general trend in their case is of

Table 1.1 Macro View of Social Change and Lexical Innovation

<i>Program</i>	<i>Action</i> <i>Lexical innovation</i>	<i>Reactions</i>	
		<i>Positive Acceptance</i>	<i>Negative Satire, Parody</i>
Protestantism	<i>Anglican</i>	>	<i>Romish</i>
Communism (UK)	<i>Proletarian</i>	✗	<i>prole</i>
Communism (US)	<i>Communist</i>	✗	<i>red</i>
Feminism	<i>Feminist</i>	>	<i>feminazi</i>
Disability	<i>physically challenged</i>	✗	<i>vertically challenged</i>
Blacks	<i>African Americans</i>	>	<i>darkies</i>
Mexicans	<i>Hispanics</i>	>	<i>wetbacks</i>
Homosexuals	<i>Urnings</i> (original coinage)	✗	<i>queers</i>

Table 1.2 Individual Semantic Change

A: Neutral/descriptive > B: Emotive > C: Insult/taboo ↔ D: Reclamation

Bougre	bugger	bugger	✓
Jewe	Jew	Jew	✗
Dago	dago	dago	✗
Hottentot	Hottentot	Hottentot	✗
Hun	Hun	Hun	✗
Queer	queer	queer	✓
Lesbian	lesbian	lesbian	✓
Negar (original form)	Nigger	nigger	✓

semantic deterioration or pejoration, that is, the words develop negative denotations or connotations.

The frameworks give two semantic perspectives, a *macro* or wider view (Table 1.1), showing the new words, and the more detailed focus of *individual semantic change* (Table 1.2). The first framework traces the lexical consequences of the new programs in terms of *action* (lexical innovation) and of subsequent *reaction*, which may be positive or negative. The symbol > indicates acceptance, essentially in public discourse, while ✗ indicates rejection. In either case there are some negative reactions, leading to satire or parody, usually in slang or underground usages, shown in the last column.

Concerning *individual semantic change*, in a number of key words for outgroups, three phases can be detected, set out in Table 1.2 as A, B, and C.

These show a pattern of deterioration from *neutrality* through negative *emotive* uses to *insult*. However, a fourth phase (D, *reclamation*) is also a feature of political correctness occurring in some cases, marked ✓; those cases where it does not occur are marked ✗.

Prime examples of the three-phase pattern (A–C) are the semantic deterioration undergone by *bugger*, *Jew*, *dago*, *hottentot*, and *hun*. Reclamation (D) is seen in recent developments concerning *queer*, *lesbian*, and *nigger*. Some of these changes, discussed in more detail in Part III, have been spontaneous; others are the result of intervention by pressure groups. However, there is the important rider that the pattern of deterioration through A, B, and C is recorded in the whole speech community, while D (reclamation) is current only in the target group. Thus *nigger* remains a term of insult when used by whites of blacks (as it was originally), the reclamation usage being current only among some blacks. This dynamic highlights one of the complex features of politically incorrect language: context and user become as important as the word itself in assessing meaning and impact. Terms which show reclamation thus have split currency, being used in various ways, according to context. Thus *queer* can be used as an insult (“bloody queers!”), or ironically (“what a queer fellow!”), or humorously (“there’s nothing as queer as folk”), or officially (“the latest book on Queer Theory”).

Historically, the role of pressure groups is obviously important, but the degree of their success depends essentially on their institutionalization or access to public media. Thus *Anglican* became current because of its official status. On the other hand, *Quaker* is a name that the Quakers themselves have always resisted, regarding it as a nickname and preferring the Society of Friends. But, being a minority, they have not succeeded in changing public currency. In recent decades, under the aegis of political correctness, semantic “successes” have been achieved by feminists, homosexuals, and environmentalists, amongst others. On the other hand, semantic makeovers for the disabled, prostitutes, drug addicts, and others have been only partial or marginal.

Semantic engineering

Semantic engineering involves interventions in the existing semantic market by two principal means: the claiming of new meanings for established words and the creation of new lexical forms. With both types the intention is to shift the agenda and highlight the change by the tactic of unfamiliarity. Notable instances concerning feminism were the extended use of *sister*, the creation of *herstory*, and the great number of forms in which the suffix *-man* has been replaced by *-person*. Another controversial

instance concerning attitudes towards homosexuals was the co-option of *gay* in the 1970s. These are discussed further in Part III.

Linguistic substitutions of “natural” or traditional terms and the generation of new artificial formulations commonly derive from some authoritarian intervention in the semantic market. In the previous subsection we noted the semantic successes achieved by Protestantism. In modern mediated and totalitarian societies the Orwellian model of *Nineteen Eighty-Four* (1949) has proved so powerful that it is now a truism to observe that language is manipulated by semantic engineering to persuade or coerce the populace, or to disguise and redefine reality, usually for propaganda purposes designed by some political oligarchy.

The basic assumption of semantic engineering is that the redefinition of conditions, roles, and programs will change individual and social attitudes. This practice is obviously more effective in a closed society, where there is no free press or competition between rival vested interests in the semantic marketplace. Typically, such definitions derive from a normative agency such as the Communist Party Politburo or equivalent. These are evident in the embedded clichés of communist rhetoric and propaganda, such as *bourgeois individualism*, *counterrevolutionary*, *imperialist lackeys*, and *capitalist warmongers*. In the totalitarian or closed society in which the state has a monopoly over the media, such manipulation is simple. The Communist formulas just quoted were essentially public and propagandist: it is hard to imagine ordinary Russians or Poles using them in daily mealtime conversation. (See, in this respect, the discussion of Julian Konstantinov’s paper “The breakdown of Newspeak in an Eastern European country” in Cameron, 1995, pp. 152–5.)

In a similar development during the apartheid era in South Africa (1948 to about 1990), the ruling white Nationalist Party generated factitious legal definitions establishing the contrived ideological use of *immorality* to mean “miscegenation” and of *homelands* to denote “reservations for the natives.” The semantic engineering of the apartheid forms was not subtle but effective, instilling in the white electorate the racially skewed notions that “immorality” or “sex across the color line” (a standard formula of the time) was a crime, already defined by the Immorality Act of 1927 as “illicit carnal intercourse between Europeans and natives.” Likewise, the “homelands” became legislated as places where the indigenous populations naturally and properly belonged, not in the “white” areas.

It would be naïve, however, to see such ideological manipulation as being confined to totalitarianism. Five years after the publication of *Animal Farm*, George Orwell’s satire on Communism, Senator Joseph McCarthy stunned America with his unsubstantiated allegations of a Communist conspiracy

within the government bureaucracy and began his infamous witch hunt. Communism became much more than an alien and irreligious political system: it became unpatriotic and had to be rooted out. A number of studies, including David Caute's *The Great Fear* (1978), have explored the ramifications of this hysterical phase of American politics. It is, furthermore, something of a historical irony that in the McCarthyite era only some universities and a few academics protested vigorously against the anti-Communist inquisition, although it was a fundamental threat to academic freedom, civil liberties, and the American way of life. As Mary McCarthy wrote at the time: "When Arthur Miller, author of *Death of a Salesman*, was indicted for contempt of Congress this February [1957], the American liberal public was not aroused" (McCarthy, 1962, p. 147). Called before the House Committee for Un-American Activities, Miller declined to give the names of people he had seen at Communist-sponsored meetings. His contemporary play *The Crucible* (1953) remains a devastating parable of this political purge.

In her role as novelist, McCarthy set her contemporary academic satire, *The Groves of Academe* (1953) in this paranoid and conformist period. But her fictional establishment is not omnipotent. By an ironic reversal, an apparently vulnerable Marxist academic shrewdly succeeds in manipulating his pending dismissal into a case of political victimization *because* of his Communist associations, thereby becoming a *cause célèbre*. By threatening to expose the university's questionable treatment of him to every liberal newspaper and magazine in the country, he survives; it is the president of the university, the author of "The Witch Hunt in Our Universities," who resigns.

Two significant semantic correlatives were *McCarthyism* (coined by Herbert Block, the *Washington Post* cartoonist on March 29, 1950) and the insidious *un-American*, which became especially current from 1953, but was in fact a revival from 1938, when the House Committee for Un-American Activities was originally set up. In a notable riposte during the proceedings, Paul Robeson told the committee curtly "You are un-American," while Lionel Stander, another actor, used more elaborate sarcasm (Ross, 2002, p. 202). The Alabaman Representative Joe Starnes asked Hallie Flanagan, an avant-garde theatrical producer, if Christopher Marlowe was a Communist.

Although *McCarthyism* is now a historical term denouncing inquisitorial methods, *un-American*, a unique nationalist epithet quintessentially expressing political correctness, retains its disturbing currency. It implies a special loyalty of the citizen to the American state manifestly not endorsed

by other national adjectival forms such as *un-French*, *un-British* or *un-Italian*. The semantic history of *un-American* is surprisingly long: it was used in 1887 by James Cardinal Gibbons, Archbishop of Baltimore: “The accusation of being ‘un-American,’ that is to say alien to our national spirit, is the most powerful weapon the enemies of the Church know how to use against her” (in Boorstin, 1966, p. 486). Furthermore, virtually every US administration since World War II has invoked the formula of *national security* to justify a range of drastic military measures from the invasion of neighboring states down to the Patriot Act (2001).

Communism and apartheid were extreme cases of social-*cum*-semantic engineering. Both were based on rigorous ideologies and comprehensive methods of enforcement. During its Communist phase *political correctness* had the status of a literal meaning, setting out the party line. This is, of course, no longer the case, so that the basic assumption is weakened, particularly when redefinitions and new agendas appear virtually overnight and apparently from nowhere.

We may consider two prime instances. The first derived from Mahatma Gandhi, obviously an inspirational and politically innovative leader of the first order. For the hereditary caste of the Indian untouchables, who formed such an affront to humanity and democracy, he proposed in 1931 the name *harijan*, derived from Sanskrit and meaning “people of God.” In 1949 the new democratic government outlawed the term *untouchable*: the people were reclassified as “scheduled castes.” However, two decades later the *Times* reported that “In spite of Gandhi’s dream . . . and the government’s enlightened policy over the past 22 years, *Harijans* must still draw water from different taps” (October 13, 1969). Since then attitudes have changed, to the point that some untouchables have become prominent figures. The second argument comes from Robert Hughes in his polemical commentary on America, *Culture of Complaint*:

We want to create a sort of linguistic Lourdes, where evil and misfortune are dispelled by a dip in the waters of euphemism. Does the cripple rise from his wheelchair, or feel better about being stuck in it, because someone . . . decided that, for official purposes, he was “physically challenged”? (Hughes, 1993, pp. 18–19)

Gandhi’s proposal and Hughes’s question go right to the heart of the problem. These two instances could be considered examples of benign semantic engineering, in that the intentions are good and the means are not totalitarian in nature.

Semantic changes in the New South Africa

The history of South Africa provides many examples of semantic engineering reflecting its colonial past and its recent liberation. Racial separation of various degrees of formality existed between the colonizers and the colonized for centuries, prior to apartheid becoming systematized by the Afrikaner nationalists after their watershed election victory in 1948. As it faced increasing international opposition, apartheid was recycled in new semantic outfits in classic Orwellian style, first as *separate development* from 1955, then *multinationalism* from 1971, then *plural democracy* from 1978, then *vertical differentiation* from 1985. It was officially declared dead in about 1990, although the term has resurfaced to designate forms of organized social separation in the wider world.

The New South Africa was essentially embodied and symbolized by the tolerance of Nelson Mandela of the liberation movements and the political rapprochement with F. W. de Klerk of the Afrikaner Nationalist regime. The new order was memorably called “the Rainbow Nation” by Archbishop Desmond Tutu and the phrase was used by President Mandela in his Inauguration address on May 10, 1994. The old apartheid politics of race and its bureaucratic terminology became taboo from 1994, officially at any rate, and new political keywords became current in the process of normalization.

Among the early positive slogans were *nation building* and its African equivalent *Masakhane*. These embodied both an ideological sense of unifying the nation after decades of racial separation and a physical sense of equitable reconstruction. At the same time, *delivery* took on the more specific and urgent sense of the provision of basic services to communities disadvantaged by apartheid. In the aftermath of the violence and terror of the apartheid system, *reconciliation* became a new key word, embodied in the *Truth and Reconciliation Commission* or TRC, founded in 1997. There were obvious counterclaims over the primacy of *truth* and its judicial consequences vis à vis *reconciliation*, leading to a different outcome, problems which have not entirely been solved; nor have those concerning *reparation* for those who suffered or were dispossessed.

There are other keywords with global currencies, which in their South African usage show semantic stress caused by ideological pressure. These are: *transformation*, *forum*, *empowerment*, *disadvantaged*, *informal*, and *quota*. In essence, all have become racialized.

Shortly after the 1994 election, the general sense of the term *transformation* in global English of “a sudden change” was given a new racialized political sense, namely the alteration of the profile of personnel in charge

of an institution (government, business, university, etc.) by means of affirmative action to reflect the demographics of the nation. Since, as a consequence of the inequalities of apartheid, there was a general shortage of black expertise in many fields, transformation could not be literal and has perforce been slow. Simultaneously and consequently, the definition of black has become a highly controversial issue, especially in relation to the Coloured community, who form the majority of the voting population of the Western Cape and about 9 percent nationally. Under the old regime Coloureds were classified “Non-White,” now they are not officially subsumed under “Black,” but classified as separate from “African.” Within the population group, some regard themselves as “Black,” others as “Coloured.” The ironic saying “not White enough, not Black enough” sums up feelings of continued political exclusion or marginalization, and is the title of Mohamed Adhikari’s book, discussed in chapter 5. Rhoda Kadalie, a Human Rights activist, commented trenchantly in a national newspaper:

In common political parlance, “transformation” has come to mean: is the organization black enough? One is never sure that black “enough” includes coloured and Indian. . . . When we talk about the transformation of the judiciary, it should be more than just a racial head-count . . . The increase in black appointments has not improved the situation; if anything it has worsened it because black arrivals often lack skills and qualifications . . . (*Business Day*, March 17, 2005)

The journalist Rian Malan’s analysis of the South African situation in the *Spectator* (October 14, 2006) took a similarly pessimistic view.

The South African academic journal *Transformation* (which has as its design logo a chameleon) is devoted to research into all aspects of this social issue. One article, “Beyond apartheid: race, transformation and governance in Kwa-Zulu-Natal cricket,” raises the major issues of race, affirmative action, quotas, and management with convenient clarity. In this province the two major groups of “nonwhites” are the Zulus and the Indians. Under the ironic heading “Too many Indians are chiefs,” the article explains:

Racial tension in post-apartheid sport is no longer an issue of black and white. New and more complex “patterns of prejudice” have surfaced. The meaning of “black” is now contested, and struggles have emerged between Africans, Indians and Coloureds over power and opportunity. The nomenclature “black African” in the Transformation Charter is a source of concern for many Indians and Coloureds as it excludes them . . . (*Transformation*, 61, 2006, p. 82)

The racial balance of national sporting teams has become a perennial source of major controversy, with merit (preferred by the players) being set against representativity (preferred by the administrators). Those selected by quota are resentful at the slight; those excluded are bitter at the perceived injustice. An uproar was created by the proposal in April 2007 of Mr Butana Komphela, Chairman of the Parliamentary Sports Portfolio Committee, that if the Springbok rugby squad for the World Cup did not match transformation quotas, the passports of white players and administrators should be withheld. In May 2008 Charl Langeveldt withdrew from the national cricket team since he felt that he had been included, not on merit, but because he was Coloured.

In 2008 the election for the President of the South African Rugby Union resulted in a narrow win for Mr Oregon Hoskins, a Coloured man, over Mr Mike Stofile, a Black man. Speaking to the national press, Mr Stofile said: "For the past four years there is no place for Black people in South African Rugby. Today was the final nail for [them]." Mr Hoskins responded: "I did not know that I am not a Black person. I did not know that I am not African and born in Africa." Hoskins also pointed out that two months previously, when the Union appointed Mr Peter de Villiers, a Coloured man, as the new Springbok coach, Mr Stofile had championed him because "he was a Black person" (*Weekend Argus*, March 28, 2008, p. 1).

Transformation has also come to serve a similar purpose to the older term *rationalization*. The original Freudian senses of giving plausible reasons which disguise real motives generated, from the 1960s, institutional meanings justifying more efficient economic production. However, it was often "used as a euphemistic camouflage for reducing the size of an operation, firing employees, etc." (Ayto, 1999). In the South African context both J. M. Coetzee's *Disgrace* (1999) and André Brink's *Rights of Desire* (2000) allude to this process as their white academic narrators lose their jobs: "'Rationalisation' it was called, an abuse of language. There's nothing rational about it. A whole new vocabulary is proliferating around us" (Brink, 2000, p. 13).

In many instances *transformation* has taken on the characteristics of the older and now discredited term *Africanization*, defined by the *OED* as "to give an African character to; to make African; to subject to the influence or domination of Black Africans." As African states achieved independence, the sense became apparent, as in this instance from the Gold Coast Government, Accra: "Statement on the Programme of the Africanisation of the Public Service" (1954). A quotation from the *Listener* (September 29, 1960)

gave a more cynical view: “The ‘Africanization’ to which so many firms have had to bow, by promoting their messengers and office boys into managing directors and retaining their Europeans merely as ‘advisers’.”

Forum refers, not to a general discussion group like the World Economic Forum, but to racially exclusive power groups such as the Black Editors’ Forum, the Black Managers’ Forum, and the Black Officers’ Forum in the South African Defence Force. *Empowerment* has become a key term in attempts to redress the economic imbalances that existed in the new South Africa, since the settlement prior to the 1994 election was essentially political, not economic. The formula *Black Economic Empowerment* is widely used and increasingly abbreviated to *BEE*. The process became controversial on two grounds: it favored only a few, and there were the familiar problems with the definition of “Black.” There has been a revealing resuscitation of *non-Black*, originally an ironic coinage of 1953, parodying the apartheid *non-White*. An article in the *Weekly Mail & Guardian* asked the question concerning invitations to a conference on “the African Renaissance”: “Will non Blacks be welcome?” (October 9, 1998, p. 24).

As the New South Africa came into being, the formula *previously disadvantaged* became a code word to refer to the nonwhite population. Obviously under apartheid the majority of the population was genuinely disadvantaged. However, programs of affirmative action and empowerment, being targeted at these population groups, have had the effect of improving the status of many to the point that *disadvantaged* has become a misnomer: in fact in some cases individuals are now privileged. The issue was raised in a very public forum by Professor David Benatar of the University of Cape Town in his inaugural lecture, “Justice, Diversity and Affirmative Action” in April 2008 criticizing the university’s employment policies. The key question he raised was “Why use ‘race’ as a proxy for disadvantage when one can focus directly on disadvantage”?

Informal has also become a code euphemism for activities outside the normal social and economic structures. Thus *informal sector* was used from about 1980 for Black hawkers and street traders, while *informal settlement* has become the established euphemism for a shanty town or squatter camp. The definition in the *Dictionary of South African English* (1989) runs: “erected in an unregulated and unplanned manner upon unproclaimed land with no infrastructure provided by the local authority.” It notes that in 1989 the Urban Foundation “estimated that 7 million people lived in informal settlements.” The term *Mandela Town* for an imitation shanty town erected in protest by students in the US and the UK is recorded from 1986.

Norms and Normality

Political correctness is fundamentally concerned with changing norms in behavior and language. Norms are not cultural universals, but socially conditioned forms and expectations of correct social behavior. Even the most abhorrent practices, such as cannibalism and incest, are sanctioned in certain societies and classes. In the ancient English tradition, Anglo-Saxon society was largely “androcentric” or male-centered, in many ways reminiscent of Sparta, the dominant ideal being embodied in the heroic code whereby a man was expected to have absolute loyalty to the regional lord and his followers or *cynn* when faced with a common martial threat. The Anglo-Saxon poem *The Battle of Maldon* celebrates the heroism and condemns the cowardice of the men of Maldon in Essex in the actual conflict against the marauding Vikings in 991. The androcentric norm is the essence of the warrior phase of the culture, excluding and preceding the romantic.

Thus there is no love interest in Anglo-Saxon poetry, least of all in the great epic poem *Beowulf*, the hero being exclusively engaged in titanic struggles against the cannibalistic monster Grendel (who represents the Anglo-Saxon “Other”), his formidable mother (the first “single parent”), and finally and fatally, against a dragon. The only significant woman in the poem is Wealtheow, Queen of the Scyldings, the Danish people who are the victims of Grendel. Her role is entirely ceremonial and diplomatic. This chaste ancient text had to await the glorious emergence of Hollywood, in the form of Angelina Jolie, to be subjected to the artificial modern norm of romance.

The great medieval romances, notably *Tristan and Isolde* and the *Morte d'Arthur*, are essentially concerned with the conflict between the cohesive heroic ideal of martial loyalty and that of romantic passion, which is socially disruptive. Both end tragically. The heroic code seemingly petered out in the fictions of the Far West and in war films. However, Leslie A. Fiedler’s controversial study *Love and Death in the American Novel* (1966) shows that, surprisingly, strong bonded relationships between males have been and continue to be a staple in American fiction.

Romance is a classic example of a socially conditioned behavior, since obviously irrational conventions such as “love at first sight,” “falling in love,” being “lovesick,” and the extreme form of “dying for love” would make little sense to Anglo-Saxons, Africans, or Polynesians. It is learnt, furthermore, from books. Yet romance continues to thrive as a global industry. This divertissement could be extended to include other norms of social behavior such as politeness, table manners, and attitudes towards death.

Thorstein Veblen's acerbic classic *Theory of the Leisure Class* (1899) surveyed a number of such artificial behavioral models. Today one of the effects of globalization and mass marketing is to create a conflict between supposed global norms or standards and actual local customs.

Norms can, of course, be reinforced by legislation, sometimes in unpredictable ways. Thus the liberal US Constitution essentially underwrites freedom of speech and enshrines the right of all citizens to bear arms, but according to the 18th Amendment, in a clear survival of the original spirit of Puritanism, it denied citizens the right to possess alcohol from 1919 to 1933. Furthermore, Communism has never been prohibited in Britain, but failed to gain a foothold there. But in America it was essentially outlawed by a variety of legislation, including the Smith Act (1940), the McCarran Act (1950), and the Communist Control Act (1954), leading to the great Communist witch hunt.

Conformity is strongest in modern mediated societies with a powerful political ideology, for example Nazi Germany and the former Soviet bloc, or nations with strong religious values, such as Puritan England, many Catholic countries, and those with a strong sense of racial identity. Apartheid South Africa combined all three cohesive factors (albeit only in the white population). In some modern secular societies there are still anomalies. For instance, Turkey retains in its penal code Article 301, an offence termed "insulting Turkishness," carrying a penalty of six months to three years imprisonment for explicitly insulting "being a Turk, the Republic, or the Turkish Grand National Assembly." According to the *New Statesman*, "Around 60 writers, publishers and journalists have been before the courts in the past year" (May 8, 2006). Among the high-profile victims are Nazim Hikmet, Turkey's greatest poet, who died in exile in Moscow, and the novelists Orhan Pamuk and Perihan Magden.

However, it would be naïve to see patriotic conformity as exclusive to societies where individual human rights are not upheld. Thus the Pledge of Allegiance in the United States is a requirement almost universally enacted by schoolchildren, and it required a legal challenge by a particular parent (*Newdow v. United States Congress* 2002) to express conscientious objection. Recently two less substantial cases concerning conformity surfaced in the New South Africa. During a cricket test match series in March 2007, it was noticed that a major South African player, Jacques Kallis, was not singing the national anthem. This occasioned much press coverage and comment, but virtually no support for Kallis, even on the grounds that this was a private matter. Prior to Workers Day (May 1, 2007) a number of labor leaders stressed that it was inappropriate for the public to regard this as an ordinary holiday, and that they should instead go to political rallies.

Although *normal* is, as one would logically expect, derived from *norm*, the two forms have diverged semantically. *Norm* is in origin a Latin term for a carpenter's square and its early senses were a pattern or rule, which provides the revealing cognates *rule* and *ruler*. It has since become a sociological term meaning a model or pattern of behavior (dating from c. 1820) arrived at on the basis of research. However, *normal* has steadily moved away from denoting behavior analyzed by strict criteria, and now essentially reflects popular notions of what is "normal." In other words, it is a misnomer. It can also be misleading, since popular notions of normality, being based on folklore and prejudice, are often erroneous, fickle, and superficial. Thus the popular and traditional notion of sexual normality was that heterosexuality was the norm, while homosexuality was "abnormal," "aberrant," "deviant," and so on. The findings of the Kinsey Report (1947) and its successors revealed a spectrum of sexual behavior, not a dominant norm, showing that many practices regarded as "perversions," such as fellatio, proved to be widespread. Although meticulously researched, the report was not received as providing new light on an obscure subject, but generally provoked incredulity and outrage.

Many notions of normality have become semantically embedded or impacted. Among them are "law and order," "right and proper," "For King and Country," the relationship between heterosexual "straight" vis à vis homosexual "bent" or "queer," and that between "deviant" and "devious," to mention a few. Several of the initiatives of political correctness have been concerned with publicizing research showing the erroneousness of many notions of what is "normal," as well as the reclamation of negative labels, topics which are taken up in Part III.

Stereotypes and Etymology

A great deal of political correctness is concerned with changing ingrained attitudes and language based on offensive stereotypes deriving from collective prejudices, folklore, and ignorance. Prejudice derives, as the term suggests, from "judging in advance" of facts or knowledge of an individual or the true situation. It is the natural consequence of stereotypical thinking. Although prejudice is most apparent in negative stereotypes and attitudes, it can appear in unwarranted positive assumptions. As the section on "Xenophobia and Antisemitism" in chapter 5 shows, many stereotypes are centuries old. Originally *stereotype* was a printing term recorded from 1798 and its earliest sense was technical, that of a stereotyped phrase or formula set in a readymade block of type. (*Cliché* has the same origin.)

The modern sense of a “preconceived and oversimplified idea of the characteristics which typify a person or situation” is recorded only from 1922 in Walter Lippman’s classic pioneering study, *Public Opinion*, where he observed that “A stereotype may be so consistently and authoritatively transferred from each generation from parent to child that it seems almost like a biological fact” (cited in *OED*). The sociological-cum-psychological sense was well defined in 1948 by Krech and Crutchfield in their *Theory and Problems of Social Psychology*: “The concept of stereotype refers to two different things: (1) a tendency for a given belief to be widespread in a given society; (2) a tendency for a belief to be oversimplified in content and unresponsive to the objective facts” (cited in *OED*).

Stereotypes are generally based on prejudice. Usually the “home” nationality sees itself in positive terms, stereotyping outsiders and foreigners by negative characterizations such as idleness, dirtiness, inefficiency, stupidity, meanness, cowardice, aggressiveness, drunkenness, sexual promiscuity, and perversion. These qualities are attributed to groups and by extension to individuals, which is manifestly absurd and offensive. Typically based on ethnic, racial, and gender considerations, these prejudicial notions often develop into what are known as *blasons populaires*, that is to say, attributions of group or national characteristics, such as “the Scots are mean,” “the Irish are stupid,” and so on. A *blason populaire* is literally a popular emblem or badge, but one given to a group by outsiders, not worn spontaneously by them. These stereotypes tend to originate in xenophobia and prove to be surprisingly tenacious, being exacerbated in times of economic hardship, competition, or war.

There are also national stereotypes, such as John Bull, originally the literary creation of Dr John Arbuthnot in 1712, a positive and aggressive representation of the national character, later usually accompanied by a bulldog. Both thrived up to World War II, but are now considered somewhat passé. The American stereotype of Uncle Sam originated verbally as an ironic interpretation of “U.S.” on soldiers’ uniforms by opponents of the War of 1812. The cartoon figure appeared first in 1832, but not in the recognizable modern form, which is attributed to Thomas Nast in 1868 (Flexner, 1976, p. 363). The French national symbol, naturally feminine, of Marianne dates from just after the Revolution, in 1792. The negative propaganda image of the French frog first appeared in an English cartoon of 1799. The semantic link dates from 1778, when Fanny Burney used it memorably in *Evelina*: “Hark you Mrs Frog . . . you may lie in the mud until some of your monsieurs come to help you out of it.” But *frog* had been long used generally of enemies, applied in 1652 to the Dutch, and previously in 1629 (in Lewis Owen’s, *Speculum Jesuiticum*) to a

religious sect: "These infernall frogs [Jesuits] are crept into the West and East Indyees."

The more obvious stereotypes are linguistically embedded in clichés such as "to turn Turk" (to betray), the supposed English "stiff upper lip," or the *mañana* attitude of the Spanish. Some, such as "Beware Greeks bearing gifts" and "The only good Indian is a dead Indian," actually started as quotations, but have become embedded as stereotypical proverbs. (The first is from Virgil's *Aeneid* II, l. 48: "*timeo Danaos dona ferentes*"; the second is attributed to Captain Philip Sheridan at Fort Cobb, Oklahoma, January 1869.) Many appear in the great collections of proverbs such as those of B. J. Whiting (1968) and M. P. Tilley (1950). Some develop into what are known technically as *ethnophaulisms*, or more transparently, as ethnic slurs or opprobrious nicknames. These include *yid*, *kraut*, *nigger*, and *wop*, often with allusions to backwardness, such as *bogtrotter*, or to dubious origins, such as *wetback*.

Research into the origins of nicknames shows the tenacity of what is known as *folk etymology* in the face of genuine etymology. (*Folk etymology* is an appealing but essentially fanciful explanation for the origin of a word, usually with the assistance of a tall story.) Thus *wop* is genuinely derived from Neapolitan and Sicilian *guappo* meaning "a dude, a swell, or a bold showy ruffian." However, prejudicial folk etymology derives the term from a supposed acronym used by US immigration officials for some Italians, namely "without passport" or "without papers." Myth continues to triumph over logic, as is shown in a number of studies, such as Irving Lewis Allen's *The Language of Ethnic Conflict* (1983).

However, actual etymologies can also be revealing. Thus one of the meanings of Anglo-Saxon *wæpen*, "weapon" is "penis," a suggestive root. *Bugger* derives from *Bulgarian*, from the prejudicial notion that the people subscribed to the Albigensian heresy and were sodomites. The medieval form *bougre* meant "heretic" from the fourteenth century and "sodomite" from the sixteenth. The attribution of "unnatural" sexual practices to heathens, deviant religious sects, or traditional enemies is a common source of stereotypical prejudice. This theme is developed further in "Xenophobia" in chapter 5.

Reliance on etymology can, however, lead to what is known as the "etymological fallacy." Thus *hysteria* derives from Greek *hystera*, meaning "womb," as in *hysterectomy*. On this genuine etymological foundation the false notion developed that only women could be *hysterical*. When Freud discovered hysterical symptoms in men, he had great difficulty in persuading his colleagues, who continued to be bound by the "etymological fallacy" and the misleading stereotype of female hysteria. Ironically, a classic study

of male hysteria is to be found in the protagonist of Shakespeare's *King Lear* (Act II, scene iv, "O! how this mother swells up toward my heart; *Hysterica passio!* down, thou climbing sorrow!").

Etymology can also be an original indicator of physical difference:

Campbell is from a Gaelic word meaning wry or crooked mouth... Cameron has the meaning also of deformity in a physical sense, meaning a crooked or hooked nose. It is strange that nicknames of this type, which are distinctly opprobrious, should have stuck to the remote descendants. Yet four great houses – Campbell, Cameron, Scrope and Giffard – are marked in this way. (Pine, 1965, pp. 112–31)

(Scrope is thought to be derived from the Norse word for a crab.) Commenting on the prevalence of nicknames, Pine observes that "at worst it is a symptom of the more vicious bent of the human mind" (1965, p. 13). In his study on the subject, Ernest Weekley added Kennedy, meaning "ugly head" in the course of a whole chapter devoted to nicknames (1914, p. 216). Less judgmental in his comments, Weekley observed simply that "It may seem strange that the nickname, conferred essentially on the individual, and often of a very offensive character, should have persisted and become hereditary" (1914, p. 191).

Nicknames for historical figures have varied from Edward Longshanks and William Rufus to those in a contemptuous rhyme satirizing the reign of Richard III:

The Cat, the Rat and Lovell the Dog
Rule all England under the Hog.

Recorded by Edward Hall in his *Chronicle* for 1483, this alludes to Catesby, Ratcliffe, and Lovell, "the Hog" referring to the boar, Richard's emblem. The rhyme qualifies as an early piece of graffiti, one of several apparently published on the door of St Paul's Cathedral. There is also an ironic medieval word-play on the name *Dominican* to mean *domini canes*, "the dogs of God." They were authorized to carry out the Inquisition as a consequence of the Papal Bull *Ad Extirpanda* published in 1252.

While the origins of these names may be regarded as footnotes, etymologies can also be revealing of attitudes. Thus *ugly* is rooted in the Norse word for "fear," and "horrid" in a Latin word meaning "to make one's hair stand on end." As is noted in chapter 5, the Old English word for "beautiful" was *fæger*, now "fair," a color term. In the word field for "beautiful" is the synonym "attractive," while among those for "ugly" is "repulsive." These

indicate primal responses. It is also worth noting that the etymological root of *belief* lies in Anglo-Saxon *leof*, meaning “dear” or “close to one’s heart.”

Difference

Historically, difference has been a major factor in social definition and identity, focusing on features of race, complexion, appearance, dress, diet, language, and religion, any or all of which can become the source of discrimination and xenophobia. Essential or superficial points of difference have also become the basis of *ethnophaulisms* or ethnic nicknames, such as the following:

Complexion: *yellow belly, slant-eye, slant, pale face, pale male, darkie, spade, schwartze*;
 Appearance: *squarehead, pongo, hairyback, hooknose, thicklips*;
 Dress: *towel head*;
 Diet: *limey, kipper, frog, kraut, macaroni, spaghetti, chilli-eater, bagel, porker*;
 Language: *hottentot, wi-wi, palaver*;
 Religion: *bugger, kaffir, Mahounde, mammet, Pope Day, Christ killer*;
 War: *Hun, Tojo*;
 Backwardness: *bogtrotter, camel jockey*;
 Immigrant status: *wetback*;
 Politics: *Whig, Tory, carpet-bagger*;
 Physical curiosities: *Hottentot apron* (discussed in chapter 5).

Also falling within the ambit of difference is the vexed issue of tribalism. Although tribal divisions exist historically as natural manifestations of differences of language, culture, and territory, colonial policy emphasized these differences and stressed racial categorization as part of a policy of divide and rule. But the end of colonialism did not bring liberation for all. According to Van den Berghe:

A neat semantic trick of mislabeling took place with the nearly universal cooperation of Western social scientists. All states were declared to be nation-states. The real nations within these artificial multinational creations of European colonialism were proclaimed to be mere “tribes” and any genuine nationalism that might develop within them was stigmatized as “tribalism.” (1981, p. 3)

In postcolonial discourse, nationalism is emphasized and tribalism becomes taboo. In the South African context, in his Steve Bantu Biko Memorial Lecture

(September 26, 2006) Archbishop Tutu warned that the rulers should “hear the complaint of those who complain about an Nguni-ocracy and even of a Xhosa-ocracy,” while the conservative commentator Dan Roodt was more contemptuous about “the Gucci set known as La Xhosa Nostra.” Sarah Britten includes this last in a list of 22 ethnic and tribal slurs (2006, p. 12).

One of the aims of political correctness is, of course, to remove or attempt to suppress from public discourse semantically impacted aspects of cultural difference which have become objects of prejudice or hurtful language. As Wolfgang Mieder observes: “Many of today’s stereotypes and prejudices date back to medieval times, and their longevity is a clear indication of the task that still lies ahead to free the world of such preconceived and ill-founded notions” (Mieder, 2000, p. 105). However, the topic is not without problems, as the Preface of *Stereotype Accuracy* comments:

It is not easy to do research on stereotype accuracy, for both scientific and political reasons. . . . The intellectual content of this book commits multiple heresies. First, research on any type of accuracy in social perception was all but unthinkable until the 1980s. . . . Second, the idea that stereotypes may sometimes have some degree of accuracy is apparently anathema to many social scientists and laypeople. Those who document accuracy run the risk of being seen as racists, sexists, or worse. (Lee, Jussim, and McCauley, 1995, p. xiii)

As we shall see in the following section, these comments on the pressures of political correctness are not as paranoid as they might seem.

Taboo

Taboos exist in all societies, from the most “primitive” to the most modern, and at all levels of society, covering a wide range of behavior. Many now fall under the rubric variously found in “not in front of the children,” “not in front of the audience,” “not in front of the ladies,” “not over the airwaves,” and so on, which are general rather than absolute prohibitions. Although behavioral taboos are very ancient, the term *taboo* was brought into English by Captain Cook in 1777 from his voyages in the Pacific. Freud pointed out in *Totem and Taboo* (first published in 1913) that “Taboo is a Polynesian word, the translation of which provides difficulties for us because we no longer possess the idea it connotes” (1950, p. 18). This is because the term traditionally denoted religious topics which were considered so holy that they could not be spoken of, or practices such as incest, cannibalism, or necrophilia that are considered disgusting or depraved.

Taboo has now become mainly semantic, referring to words which are unmentionable in polite company, such as gross religious swearwords, obscenities, racial insults, and terms like *cripple* and *spastic*. However, in this discussion *taboo* is used in its broad modern sense of “highly inappropriate” rather than the traditional sense of “strictly forbidden.” A revealing instance of the modern double standard concerning taboo language is found in this comment by Deborah Cameron: “In Scandinavia the taboo words are to do with the devil. Here [in Britain] they’re fuck or cunt” (*Guardian*, July 12, 2006). Obviously the fact that Professor Cameron can say the words in an interview and that they are printed in a national newspaper shows that they are no longer strictly taboo. There are still survivals of prissiness: a recent semantic study appeared under the title of *The F-Word: The Complete History of the Word in all its Robust and Various Uses* (Sheidlower, 1995). The front cover announced “the word” as f***.

Despite such anomalies, the broader sense of taboo has, of course, been apparent for some time. In recent decades there have even appeared dictionaries of taboo language, such as James McDonald’s *Dictionary of Obscenity, Taboo and Euphemism* (1988) and *Forbidden American English: A Serious Compilation of Taboo American English* (1990) by Richard A. Spears. In the course of his 200-page study Spears includes mild terms like *boob*, *horny*, and *one night stand*, comparatively unfamiliar codes like *b.m.* for “bowel movement,” and more provocative ethnic slurs like *dothead*, *towelhead*, *Christ killer*, *gook*, and *jew-boy*. This indiscriminacy shows the problem of where to draw the line, but Spears partly corrects this breadth by using a series of cautionary usage notes, especially in relation to “racial, national, ethnic and religious slurs” (1990, p. 205). A simpler, more drastic designation was employed by Robert L. Chapman in his *New Dictionary of American Slang* (1986) which employed the symbol Δ for obscene words but \blacktriangle for taboo terms “never to be used”.

Political correctness can be seen as an endeavor to extend the boundaries of its progressive orthodoxy to make taboo many areas which previously involved prejudicial attitudes and stigmatizing language. Socially it is thus something of an anomaly, since in modern Western society virtually nothing is “strictly forbidden.” Similarly, in modern times *obscenity* has lost its earlier strong senses of “abominable, disgusting, filthy, or lewd,” while *indecent*, which previously sustained some of the same meanings, has become almost obsolete.

In Western society taboos have generally evolved historically through three basic topics: matters of religion, sex, and race. However, the relationship with censorship is complex and often reveals a double standard. In the nature of things, censorship deals with public forms of expression, such as printing,

broadcasting, theater, or film. But the unfettered language of the street goes on. Thus in the Middle Ages, although religious swearing and blasphemy were greatly disapproved of by the Church, they clearly flourished, as can be copiously seen in the works of Chaucer and Langland, as well as in medieval drama. Furthermore, the medieval genre of the fabliau (see chapter 7) was essentially a subversion of the values of an age of faith. In the same period both obscenity and xenophobia flourished. During the Renaissance religious oaths, out of deference to authority, were generally “minced” or euphemized. Yet Queen Elizabeth reportedly “swore like a man,” the main dispute being whether “God’s wounds!” or “God’s death!” was her favorite oath. Bawdy humor and ethnic slurs thrived, as the studies of Eric Partridge (1947) and Gordon Williams (1997) have demonstrated. The same dynamic continued in the Restoration.

From the eighteenth century, the dictionary became increasingly regarded as the arbiter of usage, rather than the reflector of currency, essentially promoting and endorsing the double tier notion of language. Sexual language clearly became taboo in public, since it was suppressed in print. Only in the past century have all the “four letter” words even been included in dictionaries, although their general currency has never been disputed. During the same period religious oaths have not been censored lexicographically, but in recent decades racial epithets have increasingly been eschewed or become the subject of warnings in the form of usage notes. They remain the principal area of taboo.

Whereas the religious establishment previously safeguarded the use of Christian symbols and references, and the Master of the Revels and the Lord Chamberlain censored plays prior to performance up to 1968, there has never been a similar agency to control other forms of insulting language. The proposals for an English Academy similar to the Académie Française foundered, the last trenchant word coming from Dr Johnson, who in his Preface to his Dictionary (1755) commented that it was a project which he hoped “the spirit of English liberty will hinder or destroy.” Consequently, vague notions of “public decency” have instead prevailed. Many anecdotes attest to the resulting double standards. When two ladies “very much commended the omission of all naughty words” from his dictionary, Dr Johnson replied archly, “What! My dears! Then you have been looking for them?” (Hughes, 1991, pp. 157–8). In 1914 George Bernard Shaw denounced the hypocrisy of the English press for discussing but not printing the word *bloody* (which he had sensationalized in *Pygmalion*), since, he claimed, the word “is in common use as an expletive by four-fifths of the English nation, including many highly educated persons” (statement to the *Daily News*, April 18, 1914). By contrast, the OED’s entry emphasized

class difference, marking *bloody* as “now constantly in the mouths of the lowest classes.” In 1969 the editors of *Oz* magazine wrote to Oxford University Press complaining that the *Shorter Oxford Dictionary* did not include the word *fuck*, adding disingenuously, “We would be interested to know the reason for this curious omission.” (The correspondence is to be found in the *Times Literary Supplement*, October 13, 1972, p. 1233.) The original *OED* had not included *fuck* and *cunt*, possibly from fear of prosecution for “obscene libel,” omissions which the *Supplement* (1972–86) made good. However, it had included *nigger*, *coolie*, *frog*, *kaffir*, *coon*, *yid*, and a host of such demeaning ethnic terms. The only lawsuit brought against the dictionary’s publisher concerned offensive uses of the word *Jew* (*Schloimovitz v. Clarendon Press*). The case was rejected with costs on July 5, 1973.

In modern times the different areas of sensitivity and disapproval conscientized by feminism and by political correctness have created new areas of taboo, such as demeaning terms for women, homosexuals, foreigners, minorities, as well as mentally and physically handicapped people. R. W. Holder observed in his *Dictionary of Euphemisms*: “. . . we have created fresh taboos, relating to skin pigmentation, charity, education, and commercial practice” (1995, p. ix). To take a simple crude instance, the insulting dismissal of a woman as, say, a “stupid fat cow” has become completely unacceptable in recent decades, but for different reasons. Feminists would previously have objected to “cow” but more recently political correctionists would also object to “fat” as being “fattist.” There seems to be more sensitivity and less clarity, as Lynne Truss observes:

Thus our good intentions are often thwarted in today’s politically sensitive world. Offence is so easily given. And where the “minority” issue is involved, the rules seem to shift about: most of the time a person who is female/black/disabled/gay wants this *not* to be their defining characteristic; you are supposed to be blind to it. But then, on other occasions, you are supposed to observe special sensitivity, or show special respect. . . . I mention all this because “political correctness” is sometimes confused with respect, but it operates quite differently . . . it’s mainly about covering oneself and avoiding prosecution in a world of hair-trigger sensitivity. (2005, pp. 163–4)

As we have seen, *taboo* is used in an increasingly loose fashion for topics which are considered “inappropriate” or “unacceptable” to mention in public. Given the *anomie* or “normlessness” of modern cosmopolitan societies, there remain few taboo areas. Truly taboo subjects provoke shock, anger, even hysteria. Herrnstein and Murray’s *The Bell Curve* (1994), claiming innate ethnic differences in IQ, produced exactly such reactions in

the United States, not because the proposition was untrue, but because it violated the fundamental tenet of the Declaration of Independence, the “self-evident truth” that “All men are created equal.” The issue is discussed further in chapter 2. Murray argued in a subsequent article, “The Inequality Taboo,” that “The assumption of no innate differences among groups suffuses American social policy. That assumption is wrong” (2005, p. 14). Looking at “difference” from another point of view, Murray wrote his article “Jewish Genius,” being careful to point out that he is “a Scots-Irish Gentile from Iowa” (*Commentary*, April 2007, p. 29). He concluded by boldly taking refuge in the hypothesis that “The Jews are God’s chosen people.” The subsections on “Dictionary omissions” and “Assessments of currency” in chapter 3 deal with other aspects of taboo and censorship.

Censorship

Censorship takes various overt forms, principally “prior restraint” – that is, prevention of publication by the state or some official agency – or punitive prosecution subsequently. It has a dismayingly long history, lying outside the scope of this study, but despite increasing liberation in many social areas, the practice is far from over. Many other agencies come into play, such as church councils, political parties, and publishing houses, as well as more insidious factors leading to self-censorship, such as sensitivity to what is socially and politically acceptable. Earlier comments on censorship such as those of Milton included in the epigraphs to this work emphasized the superiority, if not the invincibility of truth. John Stuart Mill similarly argued from a moral perspective:

The peculiar evil of silencing the expression of an opinion is that it is robbing the human race; . . . If the opinion is right, they are deprived of the opportunity of exchanging error for truth: if wrong, they lose what is almost as great a benefit, the clearer perception and livelier impression of truth, produced by its collision with error. (from “On Liberty,” 1859)

A prime instance was the pressure put on Galileo to deny the Copernican system in favor of the traditional Ptolemaic version. As *The Independent* wrote when an Austrian court sentenced David Irving to three years’ imprisonment for Holocaust denial, “The principle of free speech cannot apply only to those who hold views with which we agree” (February 21, 2006).

Today moral absolutes are less in evidence, and the notion of the truth is more politicized. “Direct and unambiguous censorship, as part of state control, is easier to combat than the indirect results of it,” observes Doris

Lessing in her penetrating essay “Censorship” (2004, p. 73). She included some frank comments on the prevalence of what she called “the tyranny of Political Correctness,” which she interprets as having moved into the vacuum left by “the certainties of communism.” Lessing recounts various contemporary episodes: “In a certain prestigious university in the United States two male faculty members told me they hated PC but did not dare say so if they wanted to keep their jobs. They took me into the park to say it, where we could not be overheard, as used to happen in communist countries” (2004, p. 77).

A similar pattern is detected in a completely different realm by Ronald Harwood in his history of the British theater, *All the World’s a Stage*. An actor and playwright, Harwood describes a critical change of régime: “The Lord Chamberlain’s long theatrical censorship came to an end in 1968. . . . Nudity, uninhibited language and political satire broke out. Yet, in the ‘serious’ theatre, censorship quite as severe as any imposed by the Lord Chamberlain now came into force. Plays had to be ‘committed’ (so did actors, directors, and scene designers) or else they were nothing” (1984, p. 306). But is this truly censorship or merely an entrenched fashion?

Endorsing Harwood’s observation are the contemporary emergence of the vogue words *committed* and *engagé*. Although both were neologisms in English usage attracting a fair amount of comment, they were always used to denote or imply a left-wing concern or focus, even though logically they could be used of any political view. *Committed*, the translation of French *engagé*, is first recorded in the translation of Sartre’s *What is Literature* (1950) in this scathing quotation from the Foreword: “The worst artists are the most committed. Look at the Soviet painters.” *Engagé* emerges contemporaneously in Herbert Read’s *Art Now* (1948, p. 139): “L’art engagé, art in the service of the revolution.” A quotation from the *Listener* in 1966 echoes Harwood’s sentiments: “We hear a lot about the duty of the artist to be ‘committed’ and ‘engagé’” (March 17). A related term was *relevant*, logically general in meaning, but widely used to suggest a vague social concern or application.

The terms *committed*, *engagé*, and *relevant* are not as *en vogue* as they were 20 years ago. But political correctness is still a major force in cultural matters. Wagner remains posthumously tainted as anti-Semitic, not intrinsically, but contaminated by the admiration of Hitler and the Nazis. What if Hitler had admired his fellow-Austrian Mozart? Productions at Bayreuth now eschew the heroic world of the Germanic gods and its Aryan associations, presenting the ancient deities as alienated and absurd figures in modern dress. An Austrian production of *Die Fledermaus* in 2006 was preceded by a long statement that the production was a protest against the

current rise of neo-Nazism in that country. The production was consequently an anachronistic travesty, the aristocracy being presented as decadent drug addicts giving Heil Hitler salutes.

Media censorship is regarded as being a typical feature of totalitarian regimes and tyrannies, but occurs even in relatively free societies. Censorship of the more familiar kind, that is, the publicized banning of books, films, and television coverage, tends to be counterproductive, giving the banned item unwarranted publicity and even a false value. A classic instance was *Lady Chatterley's Lover*, the banning of which in 1928 provoked five pirated editions and an expurgated version within a year. The controversy that this one novel attracted fundamentally skewed Lawrence's literary reputation. At the watershed trial (*Regina vs. Penguin Books*, 1960) the consensus of literary experts called as witnesses was that the book was not one of Lawrence's best. Nevertheless, the victory of Penguin Books guaranteed enormous sales through the publicity of the trial, to the point that this is now the work most associated with Lawrence's name.

Consequently, the most effective censorship is surreptitiously pre-emptive, either institutionally or as a result of self-censorship. The prime case of pre-emptive institutional censorship was the newspaper *Pravda* (meaning "Truth"), which from 1918 became "the official organ" of the Soviet Communist Party. Subscription was mandatory for state-run organizations such as the armed forces. (Ironically it had been originally founded in 1908 by Trotsky in exile, published in Vienna to avoid censorship, and was smuggled into Russia, where it was very popular.) Unlike most newspapers in the West, *Pravda* was "put to bed" twice. It was first set up ready to print and a few copies submitted to the Politburo. There was then half an hour delay before the duty editor certified that the paper was "ready for printing." Angus Roxburgh's study *Pravda: Inside the Soviet News Machine* (1987) noted: "Like all printed matter in the Soviet Union, *Pravda* was censored by a member of the *Glavlit* (the Chief Administration for the Protection of State Secrets in the Press) – twice, once before printing and once before distribution" (p. 66). Roxburgh enumerates many enlightening revisions, including even doctored photographs, wherein *personae non grata* disappeared and new favorites suddenly materialized. *Pravda* was closed down by President Yeltsin in 1991.

This is a typical extreme instance of news management of a kind generally unknown in the free world. However, the notorious affair between Edward VIII and Mrs Simpson leading to the Abdication crisis produced curious double standards. Although Mrs Simpson's name appeared in the Court Circular, the major British press proprietors colluded with the Prime Minister, Stanley Baldwin, to suppress reports of the scandalous liaison.

The American press, on the other hand, sensationalized every development, so that by 1936 the distributors of *Time* magazine in London even censored out potentially libelous stories. Today, of course, “the royals” are a free-for-all. Occasionally, the “national interest” overrides other considerations. Paul Hoch cites a prime political example of a story for *Time* magazine being suppressed: it was filed under the ideologically devastating title of THE WAR IN VIETNAM IS BEING LOST (1974, p. 102). Political correctness has recently extended to the public doctoring of photographs. On posters in the Paris underground the trademark pipe of the famous comedian Jacques Tati has been replaced by a toy windmill and Jean-Paul Sartre’s omnipresent cigarettes have been extinguished.

The publishing history of George Orwell’s *Animal Farm* (1945) is highly illuminating of political attitudes and publishing pressures in postwar Britain. The book was initially rejected by a number of distinguished British publishing houses. These included Gollancz (with whom Orwell actually had a contract), André Deutsch, Faber & Faber, and Jonathan Cape, the last “on the advice of the Ministry of Information” (Holderness, 1988, p. 18). In his report for Faber, T. S. Eliot (who knew Orwell personally) wrote: “We can all see what you’re against. But what are you for?” The deductions and implications were obvious: Russia had been an ally of Britain in the war and it was thus “politically incorrect” to criticize Communism, or at least Bolshevism, at that time. Some more “positive” message or standpoint was required, even though the Stalinist purges were well known to any informed person in the West. Eventually published by Secker & Warburg, *Animal Farm* became an instant best seller and has remained so, showing that the public was far more accepting and tolerant than the would-be moral guardians of what was suitable to read.

Orwell subtitled his book “A Fairy Story,” an absurd designation, since the work obviously invited interpretation as a *roman à clef* of the ideological and personal power struggle between Stalin, Lenin, and Trotsky. As time has passed, the details of Stalinist tyranny have receded from the public memory and the forms of semantic engineering which Orwell illuminated as Newspeak and Doublethink have become routine political programs, so that *Animal Farm* is now read more as a political allegory showing the emptiness of “revolution” and that régime change is all too frequently a case of *plus ça change*. . . .

Self-censorship is obviously more difficult to trace. Thus no one will know except me what I have left out of this book for fear of repercussions. Sometimes these things are acknowledged at the time, as Virginia Woolf admitted in her novel *The Pargiters* (written in 1932 but published only in 1977): “There is, as the three dots used after the sentence ‘He unbuttoned

his clothes . . . testify, a convention, supported by law, which forbids, whether rightly or wrongly, any plain description of the sight that Rose, in common with many other little girls, saw” (cited in Smith, 1993, p. 119). Other cases only surfaced much later. Thus E. M. Forster wrote his homosexual novel *Maurice* between 1910 and 1913, but did not feel able to publish it even after the laws governing homosexuality were revised in 1967. It eventually appeared in 1971, the year after his death.

There are also the unmeasurable factors of intimidation and fear of retaliation, both of which inhibit free expression of criticism. In recent years there has been, quite rightly, an eagerness to criticize Mr Blair and President Bush for their conduct over the war in Iraq. But simultaneously there has been in Britain an unwillingness to criticize certain alien practices of immigrants such as Islamic Fundamentalists, especially Jihadist terrorists and suicide bombers, or parents who commit the crime of “honor killing,” even though these activities are regarded as morally repugnant and contrary to “the British way of life.” This double standard underscores the irony that in a modern democracy you can criticize the head of state, but not people of a minority religion. Contrariwise, in Reformation times you could vilify the Pope or other sects, but not criticize the head of state.

In terms of the recent and current debate, the strongest outcry has occurred in the United States, where the issue of free speech is fiercely contested, with many arguing that politically correct speech codes are a violation of the freedom of speech underwritten by the First Amendment, and their opponents claiming that this freedom is being abused to promote hate speech or fighting words. Indeed, the practice was seen as paradoxically a kind of conformity without the expected enforcement of a politburo or Big Brother. This aspect of the debate will be taken up in more detail in Part III.

A notable case concerned Lawrence Summers, the President of Harvard, who on January 14, 2005 addressed a small private conference on “Diversifying the Science and Engineering Workforce.” Addressing the issue that women are underrepresented in tenured positions in science and engineering at top American universities, he concluded: “So my best guess, to provoke you . . . [is] that in the special case of science and engineering there are issues of intrinsic aptitude . . .” (quoted in *Commentary* April, 2005, p. 32). Once publicized, these remarks provoked an uproar and pressure mounted on Summers to resign, which he did on June 30, 2006.

Self-censorship inhibits the publication of truths regarded as ideologically unacceptable or politically incorrect. In some cases, such as those inhibiting hate speech, this restraint is a good thing. However, in others it serves to perpetuate error or myth. In his article “The Inequality Taboo” Charles Murray, coauthor of *The Bell Curve* (1994), admitted that “the furor over

its discussion of ethnic differences in IQ was so intense” that “I have deliberately not published anything on the topic.” But he observed, chidingly: “The Orwellian disinformation about innate group differences is not wholly the media’s fault. Many academics who are familiar with the state of knowledge are afraid to go on the record. Talking publicly can dry up research funding for senior professors and can cost assistant professors their jobs” (Murray, 2005, p. 13). He was provoked, he said, into writing the article by the case of Summers, who had “offered a few mild, speculative, off-the-record remarks about innate differences between men and women in their aptitude for high-level science and mathematics” (p. 13).

In this context we may consider what has become in many ways the acid test of political correctness: what can freely be said or written in public by a reasonable person without a political agenda on matters of public importance. The reader may care to consider the following three statements and assess them as either common, tenable generalizations, or prejudiced and politically incorrect:

- A Men are generally promiscuous.
- B Black men are generally promiscuous.
- C Gay men are generally promiscuous.

Whatever the answers, the real questions are these: are these statements all equally utterable in public, or has the notion of what is “offensive” or “unacceptable” or “racist” now taken on such broad dimensions that open debate on such contentious issues is an impossibility?

Textbooks and library books

Much of the debate on the censorship aspect of political correctness has been bound up with current exchanges rather than on causes, as is usual with debates. However, Diane Ravitch’s study *The Language Police: How Pressure Groups Restrict What Students Learn* (2003) focuses on the roots of censorship in the production of school textbooks in America. Ravitch shows very convincingly that censorship starts with publishers’ guidelines and intensifies in pressure, from both Left and Right, in the areas of textbook adoption and library purchase. The practice covers every aspect of production of fiction and history, investigating roles, stereotypes, and of course language, all policed by “bias and sensitivity panels,” some of which were in office as far back as 1981.

Ravitch observes: “No one speaks of ‘censoring’ or ‘banning’ words or topics; they ‘avoid’ them. The effect is the same” (2003, p. 158). She

continues: “The censorship that has spread throughout American education has pernicious and pervasive effects. . . . Censorship distorts the literature curriculum, substituting political judgments for aesthetic ones. . . . Censorship distorts the history curriculum by introducing political considerations into interpretations of the past, based on deference to religious, ethnic, and gender sensitivities” (2003, pp. 159–60).

One of many instances cited by Ravitch is a true story about a blind mountain climber which was perversely regarded by such a panel as being “biased *against* people who are blind” (2003, p. 11). More predictably, the panel objected to Aesop’s fable of “The Fox and the Crow” on the grounds that the vain and foolish crow is female, while the clever fox is male. The panel revealed its own bias by proposing a reversal of the genders. From her experience in the US Department of Education and other research, Ravitch reveals that the New York State Education Department excised references to Jews and Gentiles in Isaac Bashevis Singer’s memoir *In My Father’s Court*, about growing up in prewar Poland. She gives other examples of senselessly obliterated cultural contexts in biography, and the general suppression of invidious cultural comparisons. Thus from John Holt’s study on the success of the Suzuki method of learning the violin, *Learning All the Time*, “the state deleted his comment that Japanese women spend more time at home with their children than American women” (2003, p. 116). This is a sociological fact: according to research quoted by the *London Times*, “about 70% of women quit their jobs when they become pregnant and most do not return to work for at least 15 years” (November 5, 2007).

“Everything written before 1970 was either gender biased or racially biased” was the summary judgment offered by the president of a major publishing house (Ravitch, 2003, p. 20). In the context of testing, “bias” was defined as “anything in a test item that might cause any student to be distracted or upset.” Control of stereotyping extends to occupations, activities, roles, community settings, and physical attributes: thus “African Americans should not be portrayed as athletes; Caucasians should not be portrayed as businesspeople; men should not be portrayed as breadwinners; women should not be portrayed as wives and mothers” and so on (2003, p. 27).

Ravitch further reveals that “because of industry mergers, educational publishing was dominated in the 1990s by four large corporations: Pearson, Vivendi, Reed Elsevier and McGraw-Hill.” (Incidentally, the last-named company issued its “Guidelines for the equal treatment of the sexes” in 1974.) She demonstrates a remarkable consistency in these companies’ notion of bias. Her analysis of the Scott Foresman–Addison Wesley guidelines (which run to 161 pages) contains the following comments: “Combining

a tone of idealism and authoritarianism, they impose a strict code of political and social correctness”; “The document is an extended celebration of multiculturalism”; “The company’s products must contain ‘a fair and balanced representation’ of the population.” In the depiction of the aged, “aprons, canes, rockers, orthopedic shoes, walkers, and wheelchairs” should be avoided, while the ageist vocabulary of *codger*, *geezer*, *old maid*, *senile*, and *spinster* are banned, together with hundreds of others. Inevitably, the new politically correct terminology of *physically challenged* and *differently abled* is recommended (2003, pp. 35–8). Her study concludes with a Glossary of Banned Words, Usages, Stereotypes, and Topics. She lists over 400 banned words.

Furthermore, Ravitch shows that Houghton Mifflin had guidelines called *Eliminating Prejudice* as far back as 1981, the details of which are stupefying in their comprehensiveness. An (unpublished) update of 2001 recommends that stories about African Americans “must avoid or limit those that are about slavery . . . that depict [them] as athletes, musicians, or entertainers, that are about controversial people like Malcolm X, and that are about civil rights” (2003, pp. 46–8). Not all of these guidelines were even easily available. Further, the head of the testing program in the Connecticut Department of Education responded to her request for passages rejected for bias and sensitivity reasons by writing that “it wouldn’t be appropriate to share that material with you” (2003, p. 167).

The battle of the books, that is, the contest over the acceptance of textbooks and library books, has been carried on nationwide by various groups, both left- and right-wing. The American Library Association publishes regular lists of the most frequently challenged books, together with the grounds. The list contains many surprises:

100 Most Frequently Challenged Books 1990–2000

- # 3 *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings* by Maya Angelou
- # 5 *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* by Mark Twain
- # 6 *Of Mice and Men* by John Steinbeck
- # 7 *Harry Potter* (series) by J. K. Rowling
- #13 *The Catcher in the Rye* by J. D. Salinger
- #18 *The Color Purple* by Alice Walker
- #25 *In the Night Kitchen* by Maurice Sendak
- #31 *Kaffir Boy* by Mark Mathabane
- #37 *The Handmaid’s Tale* by Margaret Atwood
- #41 *To Kill a Mockingbird* by Harper Lee
- #42 *Beloved* by Toni Morrison
- #52 *Brave New World* by Aldous Huxley

Of these, *Catcher in the Rye* was listed among the 10 Most Frequently Challenged Books in 2005, for “sexual content, offensive language, and being unsuited to age group.” Both *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* and *Of Mice and Men* have been “regulars” for years.

Ravitch rightly stresses the unrealistic disjunction which consequently exists in the life of the high school student today. This is between the mediated home experience consisting variously of news actuality of terrorism, hijackings, massacres, and famines; the movies of fantasy, passion, romance, and violence; the music of hip-hop and rap; contrasted with the school experience, which is sanitized, bowdlerized, and equalized from gender and racial perspectives, becoming in essence boring, banal, and unchallenging. “By avoiding controversy, we teach them to avoid dealing with reality. By expurgating literature, we teach them that words are meaningless and fungible” (2003, p. 165).

We may conclude with some observations on the melancholy topic of the burning of books. “Wherever books will be burned,” wrote Heinrich Heine, “men also, in the end, are burned” (*Almansor*, 1823). George Steiner, in his essay “Humane Literacy,” endorsed both the power of books and their destroyers: “Men who burn books know what they are doing. The artist is the uncontrollable force” (Steiner, 1969, p. 29). Ray Bradbury’s “fireman” in *Fahrenheit 451* is an untroubled functionary, enthusing: “It’s fine work. Monday burn Millay, Wednesday Whitman, Friday Faulkner, burn ’em to ashes, then burn the ashes. That’s our official slogan” (Bradbury, 1979, chapter 1).

The ethics of publication

The great satirist John Dryden wrote in 1693: “We have no moral right on the reputation of other men. It is taking from them what we cannot restore to them” (from *The Original and Progress of Satire*). These fine sentiments are of course not always observed, nor were they by Dryden himself. Taboo topics of all sorts continue to be published, for a variety of motives, pornographic, scandalous, for character assassination, and to inflict political damage. It is therefore vitally important to clarify the sources of evidence and to use discriminating criteria in assessing the validity of statements, not simply taking them at face value. This includes examining the degrees of deliberation of an utterance, from spontaneous to measured, and the mode and degree of publicity, whether oral (anecdotal or first hand), spoken, or written (letters, memoirs, diaries, biography, fiction) and when published, whether they are unofficial, authorized or official.

In this context, the reader may care to assess the following cases:

In 1972, two weeks prior to the primary election in Maine, a letter appeared in the New Hampshire *Union Leader* saying, *inter alia*, “we don’t have blacks, but we have Cannocks [sic].” The form intended was *Canuck*, a derogatory nickname for a Canadian. The letter was attributed to an aide of the Democratic senator for Maine, Edmund Muskie, whose campaign suffered from the subsequent fallout.

In 1997 in a telephone conversation the Springbok rugby coach André Markgraaf repeatedly referred to the rugby management board as “fokken [fucking] kaffirs.” The conversation, which had been taped, was leaked to the South African press. As a consequence, Markgraaf resigned immediately.

In 2006 a Republican candidate George Allen referred to “a young political activist of Indian descent” as a “Macaca.” Most of the audience were ignorant of the meaning, but a headline announced “Republican golden boy trips up on a single taboo word” (*Sunday Times*, August 20, 2006). It turned out that *macaque* means “monkey” in French, also an ugly person, and is an ethnic slur against North Africans.

In all these cases the language used was “inappropriate,” in the Clintonian sense, in the Blair sense, and more importantly, in the real sense. It was racist or demeaning. But the motive for publication was basically to manipulate public opinion or some power group against the speaker.

Conclusion

We have seen that political correctness is a highly complex topic with many aspects, sources, influences, and manifestations, most of which will be taken up in greater detail later. A simple definition is not really possible, since the phrase now encompasses a whole range of attitudes which have undoubtedly affected both behavior and language. Among the primary sites of struggle for semantic redefinition which we shall consider are race and ethnicity, disability, AIDS, disease, the canon, culture, curricula, gender and sexual orientation, xenophobia, the environment, animal rights, addiction, criminal behavior, and mental disorders. These and other topics are treated in detail in Part III. In all some 200 established terms and new lexical formations will be discussed and analyzed.

In broad terms, political correctness seeks, by focusing on these categories, to stress human communality and correspondingly to downplay engrained

differences and exclusivity, discouraging judgmental attitudes and outlawing demeaning language. In this process a new framework of values and morality has arisen, one which has to some extent supplanted traditional orthodox categories. These are admirable initiatives. But they raise a methodological problem concerning semantic engineering, in that in the history of linguistic study, the modern era is supposed to be that of descriptive linguistics, that school which respects actual usage, regarding itself as a period of modern enlightenment succeeding the earlier dominance of prescription (laying down rules of usage) and proscription (outlawing certain forms and practices). The extent to which the invented forms of political correctness have achieved a viable and effective currency can be more meaningfully assessed after an interval of time, when the heat of the initial debate has cooled. Ferdinand de Saussure, the founding father of linguistics, observed that “Of all social institutions, language is least amenable to initiative,” because of what he identified as a “collective inertia towards innovation” (1966, pp. 73–4). But Saussure’s *Cours* was first published nearly a century ago, prior to many mediated and Orwellian changes. The enterprise of political correctness was and continues to be an attempt to change or suppress, not the whole *langue* or linguistic system, but the meanings of particular *paroles*. More especially it forms an attempt to establish a new polite public discourse to replace various forms of personal or demotic usage of a prejudicial and demeaning kind. Has the initiative succeeded, and if so, to what extent? Or has “collective inertia” prevailed?

How current is the language of political correctness, really? And how seriously is it taken? It seems hard to believe that anyone could say or listen to “significant other” with a straight face, or write “differently abled” without a grimace or a sigh, or worst of all, speak of “inappropriately directed laughter.” Yet despite its anomalous breeding ground and its essential oddity, this strange “new world or words” has developed a certain currency. While the currency of politically correct language is indisputable, its meanings, applications, and acceptance are still controversial. This semantic aspect is the primary focus of the first three parts of this work and supplies the rationale of its contribution to the debate. We shall now turn our attention to the debate which threw up these terms, and the evolution of the phrase *political correctness* itself.