Don’t ever say ugly. Say cosmetically different.

Umberto Eco *on the linguistic lunacies of the zealots of political correctness, the fun to be had at their expense and the real issues underlying it all.*

For some years now, American universities have concerned themselves about being ‘politically correct’ in an effort to erase every form of discrimination – racial, sexual or physical.

In the defence of all oppressed minorities, animals included, and in the red-hot war against ‘gender erasure’ (otherwise known as the historic marginalisation of the female of the species), a great battle is under way to eliminate from everyday language all those expressions which underline and draw attention to prejudice.

A manual on the subject was published in the USA: The Official Politically Correct Dictionary and Handbook. A satirical work, it takes the principle to its logical extremes. Certainly many of its proposals are pure spoofs. But some of the more surprising ideas come from such semi-official sources as the Office of Student Affairs at Smith College, feminist groups or radical university professors.

Whoever said that ‘ugly’ should become ‘cosmetically different’, or that ‘bald’ should be ‘follicularly handicapped’? And who suggested that we should never say ‘history’ but ‘herstory’? This was seriously considered years ago, and is even listed in the Random House-Webster Collegiate Dictionary under the definition: ‘used as an alternative means of distinguishing or emphasizing the unique experience of women’. With the blessing of etymology, of course.

The authors, the jokers, insist that we should no longer say dentures but ‘alternative teeth’. But calling the mentally unstable ‘differently abled’, old folk ‘chronologically gifted’ and dishonest people ‘ethically disorientated’ are all serious sources – or sources that take themselves too seriously.

It is not a joke, either, that US citizens of origins that are oriental (a word that does not holds any derogatory connotations) are now asking to be referred to as Asian-Americans. Apparently ‘oriental’ is an adjective which reflects a western point of view. In fact, though, when the ancestors of these people emigrated to the United States they were the ones to leave the West behind and move east.

The authors show that government sources distinguish themselves in the political correctness stakes when they talk of ‘air support’ instead of bombardment or ‘friendly fire’ to admit that American soldiers have killed one another by mistake.

Reference is made to a 1984 State Department report on El Salvador and Chile , which used the term ‘arbitrary loss of life’ to describe the massacre of political opponents. The authors spare no one, revealing that when logicians mention ‘conditional forgeries’ they are really talking about lies.

This book is written to make people smile. But, all things considered, it shows how even the most noble of intentions can reach ridiculous levels of bigotry and hypocrisy.

Words have their uses, but they do not resolve everything. Here in Italy dustmen are now known as ‘ecological operators’, yet I’m sure that somewhere in the heart of every ecological operator there lies a certain bitterness that he or she is not a diamond merchant.

The reform of language can at times serve as an excellent alibi, simply eliminating appearances rather than differences. But even the best of intentions can make for a bad conscience. Remember how, many years ago, those who had been known rather outrageously as ‘negroes’ and then, with discriminatory elegance, as ‘coloured people’, chose to call themselves ‘blacks’?

This word-succession is easier to understand in the context of reality: when the president of the United States has his shoes shined, there is a strong probability that the president will be white and the shoe-shiner black, American blacks prefer the definition Afro-American.

It is obvious that the inexorable slide towards the least-discriminating term will stop only when a black president has his shoes shined by a white.

Before you read.

1. What is political correctness?
2. When and where did the term appear?

Exercise 1

Answer the questions.

1. Who is the author of the article?
2. What do you know about the author?
3. What is the author’s opinion on the subject of political correctness? Find arguments in the text.

Exercise 2

Match the underlined words in the text to the definitions below.

1. an unfair and unreasonable opinion or feeling, especially when formed without enough thought or knowledge	
2. the associated or secondary meaning of a word or expression in addition to its explicit or primary meaning	
3. extreme foolishness	
4. to make known; disclose	
5. expressive of a low opinion	
6. a light humorous parody, hoax, deception	
7. a part of a population differing from others in some characteristics and often subjected to differential treatment	
8. going beyond all standards of what is right or decent	
9. a person who has very strong feelings about something (such as religion or politics) and who wants other people to have those feelings; fanatic	

10. not able to be stopped or changed	

Exercise 3

Find equivalents to the following words.

1. ugly _____
2. bald_____
3. history_____
4. dentures_____
5. mentally unstable_____
6. old folk_____
7. dishonest people_____
8. lies_____
9. bombardment_____

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