

Prescriptivism, Politics, and Lexicography: A Reply to Jane Barnes Mack

by

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Nomen est omen.

—Plautus

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In her recent opinion piece in *ILT News* (“Politically Correct Linguistics: How Postmodern Words Corrupt the English Language”), Jane Barnes Mack rekindles the fire of several controversies, current and historical, academic and political (Mack, 1992). Her views on language and lexicography place her solidly in a long tradition of linguistic complaint, in which “someone or something had to be blamed” for the perceived corruption or decline of the English language (Milroy & Milroy, 1985: 34). This “complaint tradition” ranges from Ranulph Higden in the fourteenth century to Caxton in the fifteenth, from Jonathan Swift’s “Proposal for Correcting, Improving and Ascertaining the English Tongue” (1712) to the critics of Webster III in the 1960’s (Milroy & Milroy, 1985: 29-53). With her use of the term “politically correct,” she also enters tangentially into the fray of a curriculum controversy in American higher education over who determines the content of what is studied and on what basis. The debate has deep ramifications and is related to a comprehensive, highly diverse intellectual and social movement in the United States subsumed under the loose rubric of “multiculturalism” (see Boletta, 1992).

Ms. Mack objects to the inclusion in the recently-published Random House Webster’s College Dictionary (Random, 1991) of “dreadful words and phrases,” and she is disconsolate, sometimes palpably angry, that the dictionary “gives authority to dozens of questionable usages—most of them colored with politically correct bias” (Mack, 1992: 125). Her underlying assumption, simply stated, is that dictionaries should be arbiters of language rather than recorders of it, “prescriptive” rather than “descriptive.” This controversy has been raging at one temperature or another throughout the history of lexicography, but many linguists, lexicographers, and common folk alike thought the essential questions

had been more or less settled back in the sixties when the brouhaha attending the publication of Merriam-Webster's *Third New International Dictionary* (1961) died down. The issues raised at that time have literally become textbook case studies (Sledd & Ebbitt, 1962), and the descriptivist stance now forms the bedrock of lexicographic theory, providing the guiding principle for the everyday practice of dictionary makers. In the subfield of lexicography and in linguistics at large, all but the most unregenerate, mossbacked conservatives agree today—*pace* Ms. Mack—that general dictionaries of the English language should record existing words and usages, and that lexicographers are derelict in their responsibilities if they ignore new lexical items due to the prejudices of the compilers (see Landau, 1984; McArthur, 1986; McDavid and Duckert, 1973; Wells, 1973). Ephemerality is rarely a valid reason for exclusion, especially once the words start appearing in print, regardless of the format or forum, whether the context be sacred or secular, wise or foolish, political or academic.

In 1857, Richard Chenevix Trench, an original member of the committee set up by the Philological Society, whose groundwork ultimately led to the publication of the original *Oxford English Dictionary*, delivered two papers “On Some Deficiencies in Our English Dictionaries” (Trench, 1857). His point of view was influential in establishing the broad and non-restrictive spirit that guided the compilers of that great and singular world standard of lexicography. Here is how contemporary lexicographer Tom McArthur characterizes Trench's philosophy of dictionaries and dictionary-making:

For Trench a dictionary was an inventory of a language and not a tool for selecting only the “good” words of that language (however judged); a lexicographer is properly a historian and not a moralist or critic. Trench examined the literary and textual orientation of lexicography, but dismissed its legislative function: the door, as he saw it, should thenceforward be kept open for all the high and low, misshapen or handsome, useful or useless words in a language, and this quite simply because they had been or were being used somewhere by someone for some purpose. . . . If there was to be an authority it would be that of comprehensiveness, of objective citation and definition, and not the arbitrary socioaesthetic inclinations of the compiler or social group to which the compiler belonged. (McArthur, 1986: 127)

Not only would James Murray and his fellow compilers of the original *OED* take strong exception to Ms. Mack's exclusionist fiats, their heirs, the current editors

of the *OED*, would also disagree in both letter and spirit with her protestations about prescriptivism and authority. Philip Gove, the editor-in-chief of Webster III, also weighs in on the side of descriptivism: “the function of a dictionary is to reflect the facts of usage as they exist. A dictionary neither permits nor prevents” (quoted in Wells, 1973: 84). In short, with her righteous and indignant fulminations about prescriptive authority, Ms. Mack is beating a dead horse which deserves to rest in a quiet death rather than having its sepulchral slumbers disturbed by outbursts of high dudgeon. *Requiescat in pace*.

Perhaps a more timely aspect of the article is the connection Mack makes between what she terms “politically correct” language and the role of dictionaries. “Politically correct” has recently become a shibboleth in American academia, used by both liberal and conservative custodians of the traditional academic status quo to brand and silence critics, particularly African-Americans, feminists, Native Americans, Latinos, lesbians and gay men, Asian Americans, and other groups. Catherine Stimpson points out that academic conservatives in the United States use the P. C. term to further their own political agendas. Their “disagreement with P. C. principles long preceded their use of the term, and it now becomes a convenient label for developments they oppose, such as affirmative action, women’s studies, black studies, ethnic studies, gay and lesbian studies, and cultural studies” (Stimpson, 1991a: A40). Elsewhere Stimpson elaborates further on the reasons behind the use of the term “politically correct”:

The “PC” phenomenon is an obvious response to two developments. the first is the formidable body of contemporary humanist scholarship about the relations between power and culture. . . . Some scholars who do such studies go public with their politics and its relation to their academic work. This, in turn, has led to charges that their academic work is “only” political, especially if their politics are “left.” The second development is the linkages between social changes on our campuses and the intellectual ones. For the greater presence of women has helped to build women’s studies. The open presence of gays and lesbians has made gay and lesbian studies possible. (Stimpson, 1991b: 409-10)

Although Mack fails to clarify how “politically correct” proponents of new coinages have forced their inclusion in dictionaries, as she implies has been the case, she clearly objects to the aesthetics of such words as *waitron*, a non sex-specific replacement for *waiter* and *waitress*. Indeed, the word is ungainly, it is reminiscent of *automaton*, *neutron*, or some other non-human entity, and it

probably won't win any prizes for exquisite coinages. Contemporary lexicography, however, does not use "good taste," euphony, or aesthetic judgments as benchmarks for deciding which words to record.

Words like *womyn* and *herstory* might be equally offensive to some because they appear to result from etymological ignorance and confusion and sometimes sound a bit silly, but they are not necessarily trivializations. Discussing what he calls "the explosion of gender-related neology since the 1960s," Baron comments on the the genesis of this neologistic creativity which Ms. Mack would like to eradicate from dictionaries:

New words are coined to support or oppose the rights of women; to neutralize sex-specific terminology; to make neutral words sex-specific; to describe the changing roles of men and women; and in general to fill in the gender gaps in the vocabulary of English. Some of the terms, like *herstory*, are serious attempts to highlight through word play the previously undervalued contributions of women to civilization. *Herstory*, which is not recognized by any standard dictionaries or collections of new words [until Random House Webster, of course—WLB] though it continues to appear in printed sources, is defined by one feminist pamphlet as "1. The past as seen through the eyes of women. 2. The removal of male self-glorification from history." In contrast, *history*—which is not a blend of *his* and *story*—is defined as "the past as distorted by men." (Baron, 1986: 185-86)

While *herstory* might raise Ms. Mack's gorge for a variety of reasons, this is clearly not the case for everyone. In any case, creative finesse, political connotations, and etymological soundness in neologisms are not the controlling factors in lexicography. And times do change. As Bergen Evans pointed out in 1962, writing in *The Atlantic* to defend Webster III against its critics:

Every publication in America today includes pages that would appear, to the purist of forty years ago, unbuttoned gibberish. Not that they are; they simply show that you can't hold the language of one generation up as a model for the next. It's not that you mustn't. You can't (quoted in McArthur, 1986: 139).

There is no denying that *herstory*, *womyn*, *Native Americans*, *heightism*, *speech-impaired* and many other expressions like them, to which Ms. Mack would apply her purgative lash of linguistic purity, are the outgrowth of an ongoing struggle for social equality by marginalized groups, especially women, who have been the victims of terminological prejudice for centuries, not only in

English, but in virtually all the world's languages (see Lakoff, 1975; McConnell-Ginet, Borker, & Furman, 1980; Poynton, 1989; Thorne & Henley, 1975; Thorne, Kramarare, & Henley, 1983). Nonetheless, it flies in the face of the fundamental principles of contemporary lexicography to reject these neologisms because they are political, unattractive, distasteful, or ungainly coinages, or even because they are representative of certain special interest groups. Such cavalier selectivity would be, in a word, bad scholarship: a capitulation of the descriptive responsibilities of dictionary makers to the personal and arbitrary whims of individual opinion. However inept or fraught with unpleasantness some of these new words might appear to Ms. Mack and others whose taste, politics, or academic training might find them objectionable, they are fair game for the cullers of words and keepers of lexical databases. To exclude them altogether from dictionaries is, ironically, to perpetrate the same kind of “messianic” behavior Mack accuses the “politically correct” of engaging in.

The compilers of dictionaries do indeed reflect politics, not only in their choice of words to include but—perhaps more tellingly—in the words they leave out. The key is that they must reflect everybody's politics. While dictionary compilers might privately espouse certain views about the world and might have emotional reactions to new words or usages they encounter, in their role as lexicographers they are recorders and historians of words, not arbiters of suitability and taste. As Landau points out:

Prescription is impossible to distinguish from bias. Any preferred usage or condemnation of existing usage necessarily reflects the educational or cultural background of the editor making such a judgment. Such judgments are welcome if the user consciously or unconsciously admires the educational class or cultural background of the editor But they have no place in coloring definitions in a general dictionary any more than editorial opinions belong in straight news articles in the morning newspaper. (Landau, 1984: 32)

Ms. Mack's article has, of course, its own political point of view, but since it is linguistically and politically closer in spirit to a traditional and highly conservative status quo ante, it is not “political” in her universe of reference. A case in point is her anti-feminist cavilling about the word *girl* as a sexist term. Referring to a poem about Trojan girls, she maintains that the term “suggests innocence and beauty” (Mack, 1992: 126). While this may be true in the poem

cited, Mack's comments are obfuscatory or at least disingenuous since, of all the terms mentioned in her article, the use of *woman* instead of *girl* has become the most domesticated, at least in the United States. Feminists (and others) have objected to the term *girl* for the past twenty-five years or so because it was used to refer to all women whether they were teenagers, seventy-year-old grandmothers, executives, office managers, secretaries, bartenders, strippers, or prostitutes. It was and remains a demeaning and dismissive term when used for mature, adult females. The main issue here has little to do with poetic nuances or fine points of semantics. The brutal fact is that the use of *girl* often brings with it social, occupational, and legal discrimination. Ms. Mack ignores an overwhelming tendency in contemporary usage to prefer *woman* over *girl*. As Baron soberly and judiciously points out: "at least in certain contexts, we might safely guess that *woman* remains the term of choice in carefully edited prose, and that its range is expanding. One also suspects that *girl* is rapidly disappearing in reference to adult women even in colloquial speech, because the informal rules of politeness have marked such usage as disparaging" (Baron, 1986: 219). Mack's allusion to a poem about Trojan girls hardly takes cognizance of a highly complex vernacular use of language to minimize, patronize, and discriminate. Nor does she point out that even *girl* is a relatively sanitized term compared to other epithets for women which are even more demeaning (e.g., *chick, tomato, dish, broad, bitch, piece, cunt*).

The struggle for sexual equality or neutrality in language is hardly new, however, since the quest for the gender-neutral, epicene pronoun has persisted in English for some three-hundred years (see the detailed history in Baron, 1986, chapter 10: 190-216). As is usually the case, language mirrors its social milieu, and the late twentieth century has been a crucible of social change, especially in the United States. This social ferment finds its analogue in lexical change. One reaction to such inevitable change is Ms. Mack's policing of dictionaries: "Authoritarian notions about language and dictionaries may be viewed as extra- or metalinguistic, outside the area of language itself, and based on a desire for certainty and stability in a world of change." (Wells, 1973: 74)

While Mack charges the proponents of neologisms with forcing their political views on others through language, her zeal to maintain a pristine and ostensibly neutral aesthetic for English would purge any political language that she does not regard as suitable. I would like to suggest that Ms. Mack herself, in her alacrity to expunge these words from dictionaries through the exercise of

what McArthur calls the “legislative urge” of the lexicographer (McArthur, 1986: 93-101), is guilty of the very intolerance she claims to find in her “politically correct” linguistic foes. Are Ms. Mack’s objections not, in fact, politics masquerading as linguistic concern for the poor, beleaguered English language? Is not the ideologically based censorship of dictionaries she advocates tantamount to the “invidious assault” (Mack, 1992: 127) she fears from her linguistic antipodes?

The ultimate solution to the problem of appropriate terminology and nomenclature does not lie in the censorship of dictionaries on whatever grounds, but, rather, in a broader social amelioration of prejudice and discrimination against those who are different from ruling power groups whether because of their skin color, sex, sexuality, national origin, ethnicity, religious beliefs, political convictions, or bodily condition. When the social problems which spawn such linguistic correctives disappear, it will no longer be necessary to change the language. For the moment, however (and I hope Ms. Mack will forgive me for using two phrases she explicitly dislikes) “underrepresented groups” are producing neologisms to challenge the language which the “dominant culture” uses to describe them. And it is the responsibility of lexicographers to record these new words dispassionately.

The dehumanizing effects of terminological pigeonholes came home to me one day in the early seventies while having dinner in a restaurant in San Francisco, then a seedbed for much of the new terminology Ms. Mack objects to. Unsure of what term was proper to get the attention of the young woman who was serving us our food (the *-ess* ending caveat made “waitress” seem inappropriate), I finally, in the throes of terminological confusion, said nothing and simply signalled with my hand. When the young woman came over, I asked her what the appropriate term might be for getting her attention. Her reply: “Well, my name is Mary.”

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