

Using Conscious Language

Recently I rented the movie *The Bonfire of the Vanities*, based on the book by Tom Wolfe, which I had read in the 1980s. I was shocked at much of the language in the movie and the realization that that movie could not have been made today because it did not use conscious language.

What is conscious language? It means being aware of all of the "isms" — sexism, racism, classism, ableism, ageism — and striving not to offend anyone. This is not just a matter of political correctness but rather a way of being thoughtful and considerate to people of all ages, ethnicities, abilities/disabilities, and income brackets.

Take the word "elderly." And I mean that literally. You can have it! I am not a fan of that word, nor do I like the term "old." Unlike the word "young," "old" is inherently pejorative, which is to say that it is rarely used positively. Certain cultures like India, China, and South America seem to revere their elders, but this is not the case by and large in North America and Europe. Even the *New York Times* doesn't like the word "elderly"; it recommends "older person." I'm good with that. It's factual, but it doesn't sound derogatory.

What about "mulatto"? I grew up thinking that word was acceptable, but the preferred term now is "biracial" or "multiracial."

Even when we're not talking about people, it's not okay to use the words "lame" or "crippled" anymore (e.g., instead of saying that the economy was crippled, you could say that it was destroyed). Likewise for "dumbfounded" or "gypped." We don't want to say, "wheelchair-bound" or "confined to a wheelchair," and it stands to reason that if a female is over the age of 18, it's nice to refer to her as a "woman, a young woman," or even "a lady," although I'm not a particular fan of the latter, but she is no longer a "girl." Very few people would refer to a 42-year-old man as a "boy," but women in their 40s are routinely called "girls."

In terms of disabilities and mental health, it's preferable to say somebody "has schizophrenia or bipolar illness" rather than "somebody is bipolar" or "is schizophrenic." It sounds like a slight distinction, but by doing the latter, you are not defining the person entirely by their condition but instead saying that it is one of many things that have, *not who they are*. Avoid using the term "normal" (e.g., "three of the students have disabilities, but two are normal.")

Is it okay to use the word "gay"? Yes, definitely, if you're referring to people who love and are attracted to the same sex, but if you're referring to a haircut or some pants you don't like, you don't want to use the word "lame" or "gay." Interestingly, the term "homosexual" has gone out of fashion, and most people in the LGBTQ community would prefer to be called "gay, lesbian, bisexual, or trans" (and the term is "transgender," not "transgendered").

Ridiculous? Overwhelming? It doesn't have to be. Again, it's not about being PC. It's about being aware that many of the terms that have pervaded our language are outdated and based on cruel and offensive stereotypes. I know a man who went to a school in Alberta that had the words "for the mentally defective" in the title of the school name! No one would ever think to say that now, and that shows how much progress we have made. So, before you pen your next article, blog post, book, or email, think about some of the terms you're using, and ask yourself if your vocabulary has upgraded to 2021.