

Speech Cops on Patrol: How P. C. Language Regulations Undermine Communication  
(2015)

“The one great rule of composition—and if I were a professor of rhetoric I should insist on this—is, to *speak the truth*.”

—Henry Thoreau,

“The Last Days of John Brown”

“But will any man say that if the words *whoring, drinking, cheating, lying, stealing*, were by an act of Parliament ejected out of the English tongue and dictionaries, we should all awake next morning chaste and temperate, honest and just, and lovers of truth? Is this a fair consequence? Or, if the physicians should forbid us to pronounce the words *pox, gout, rheumatism*, and *stone*, would that expedient serve like so many talismans to destroy the diseases themselves?”

—Jonathan Swift,

“Abolishing of Christianity in England”

“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’?”

—Robert Hughes, *Culture of Complaint*

In high school I learned and sang an early-nineteenth-century German student drinking song, “*Die Gedanken Sind Frei*.” Perhaps you know it too:

Die Gedanken sind frei, wer kann sie erraten,  
sie fliegen vorbei wie nächtliche Schatten.  
Kein Mensch kann sie wissen, kein Jäger erschießen  
mit Pulver und Blei: Die Gedanken sind frei!

Thoughts are free. Nobody can know them, nobody can shoot them, you can’t be thrown into jail for what you think . . . thoughts are free.

I’m not sure what kind of thoughts were at issue when this song was written, but it expresses a certain fear of restricted speech . . . and even ideas. It’s the kind of fear which led the founders of America to incorporate into the U. S. Constitution as the *First Amendment*—“Congress shall make no law . . . abridging the freedom of speech, or of the press. . . .” Thus wrote James Madison in 1789, allowing protesting students in the Sixties, and more recently a Minnesota woman arrested for insulting a cop by calling him a “motherfucker,” to use the First Amendment as a successful defense against laws which make insulting cops illegal. Thank you, Mr. Madison for making America “the land of the free and the home of the brave.”

I often point out to students and colleagues that the last line of our National Anthem is a question: “Does that star-spangled banner yet wave o’er the land of the free and the home of the brave?” The flag flies today for sure . . . but are Americans as free and brave as Poles imagined them to be in 1989, when I arrived in Łódź to teach American Culture to students so

accustomed to life controlled by speech and action Milicja that they could not answer a question in class (or on paper) without conferring with friends to make sure they gave the acceptable answer? Are we free and brave in the U. S.? I don't know. I do know that Prof. Vincent Sarich, of Berkeley, told a *Newsweek* reporter, "There are subjects you don't even talk or think about" (Adler 50). In 1990, he meant race, gender and homosexuality. Today the forbidden territory has expanded.

Well, what's new? Back in the Fifties, our high school had pretty strict speech, dress, and behavior codes pitched as making us good, inoffensive, classy representatives of Springfield High School. It was against these codes that my generation rebelled in the Sixties. I may be patting myself on the back a bit here, but I do think that the Sixties generation was—or tried hard to be—free and brave in thought, word, and deed, even though many of us got into serious trouble for what we did and said. But ultimately we won. My academic advisor in graduate school, whose desk featured a stars-and-stripes poster reading "FUCK COMMUNISM" ("just so they know I'm on the right side," he told me) wrote obscene limericks about colleagues, which he posted on the department bulletin board. On the wall of my own office in the early Seventies hung a poster of Dennis Hopper on his motor-cycle in *Easy Rider* giving the finger to the world. That's sign language we all used. In Samuel Walker's book *Hate Speech*, the chapter covering the years 1952-1978 is titled "Free Speech Triumphant."

But that's not the book's final chapter. The revolutions of the Sixties were soon curtailed. In the mid-Seventies, I found myself in trouble for telling administration that by cancelling at the last minute summer classes which had not enrolled six students they were "fucking over faculty and students both." It was not the message that offended administrators, but the word. "Don't use that word in memos women secretaries might read," the vice president told me. Soon the dean was directing me not to teach Ginsberg's "Howl," because some students were uncomfortable with its homosexuality. I continued to teach the poem . . . and soon the dean was escorting me to the office of the vice president, who was telling me to empty my office.

So in 1981 I moved from Illinois to Minnesota, teaching at a school which was still mentally back in the high Sixties. (Thinking in rural Minnesota tends to run at a fifteen-year lag.) We said and we did what we thought—faculty and students both.

I will not go into details—they're in chapter 7 of my memoir *Here I Stand*—but let me tell you, things have changed there as well. In their book *The Shadow University*, Alan Kors and Harvey Silvergate write, "There, public universities act like partisan political seminaries and have almost no concern for the most fundamental issues of free speech. In a state once known for protecting dissidents, a sorry pall of orthodoxy now prevails" (174).

On June 20, 2001, we received messages from the Commissioners of Employee Relations and the Department of Administration telling us that we must make sure that anything we do will "pass public scrutiny without embarrassment to the State of Minnesota." Especially we must not do anything "inappropriate, offensive, and/or discriminatory." Like this talk?

In 2004, my university held a "First Amendment Forum." What the event celebrating free speech was really about was placing new limits on speech. The brochure notes that "Students shall be free to organize and join organizations to promote their common and lawful interests, *subject to institutional policies or regulations*" (italics added). It goes on to discuss "What's not

protected: Hate Speech.” Members of the university community are not to use language which would create “a hostile working environment.” The current policy on “Freedom of Expression Procedure” talks the same talk: “The University will protect the rights of freedom of speech, expression, petition and peaceful assembly as set forth in the U. S. Constitution. [But] Southwest Minnesota State University maintains its right to regulate . . . acts of expression and dissent.” *Free Speech for Me, But Not for Thee*, Nat Hentoff titled his book.

Southwest State and Minnesota, however, are just part of a national trend. While laws governing speech can be found as early as Maryland’s 1649 Act of Toleration, the present attack on free speech emerged during the late 1970s, gathered strength in the Eighties, as it moved from exorcising racists and misogynists (do we even have a word for man-haters?) to combating “hate speech” and speech directed at persons with various disabilities: physical, mental, sexual. That crusade has most recently addressed “unprofessional speech” and “bullying” speech and behavior—anything that makes anyone feel insecure. The codes, like that First Amendment Forum, give lip service to free speech while announcing that speech is not free. While Marshall Rosenberg in his book *Nonviolent Communication* preaches in chapter one *against* speech control because “the second component of NVC is to express how we are feeling” (37), those feelings must be non-evaluative feelings, and they must never be (title of chapter 2) “Communication that Blocks Compassion.” Rosenberg is clearly a thought, as well as a language, cop. So are James Garbarino and Ellen deLara, authors of *And Words Can Hurt Forever*: “Every school year, literally millions of teenagers suffer from emotional violence in the form of bullying, harassment, intimidation, humiliation, and fear. . . . [P]sychological stabbings are all too common in the daily lives of kids” (ix). Specifically, teenagers must refrain from saying anything that might make a person “feel powerless.” That includes words and stories, true or untrue. And it is the duty of principals and teachers to “Step Up to the Plate” (chapter 11) and even use violence to protect the bullied. Kids “admit that they are willing to forgo some of their freedoms in school in order to have better, more consistent supervision” (196) and “most students want adults to intervene” (197).

Introducing a collection of essays titled *Bullying Behavior*, Nan Stein admits, “Under the prevailing definition of bullying, almost anything has the potential to be called bullying, from raising one’s eyebrow, giving ‘the evil eye,’ making faces (all very culturally constructed activities) to verbal expressions of particular people over others” (2), especially regarding “the imposition of compulsive heterosexuality” (3).

These developments were both predicted and critiqued in books like Neil Hamilton’s *Zealotry and Academic Freedom* (1995), Kors and Silvergate’s *The Shadow University* (1998), Diane Ravitch’s *The Language Police* (2003), and Donald Downs’ *Restoring Free Speech and Liberty on Campus* (2005). More recently, a St. Paul ordinance made it a criminal act to place “on public or private property a symbol, object, appellation, characterization, or graffiti . . . which one knows or has reasonable grounds to know arouses anger, alarm, or resentment in others.” (It was struck down by the Supreme Court.) But speech codes prevail today as any number of anecdotes will demonstrate. Our university includes “verbal violence” in its “Zero Tolerance to Violence” policy. State of Minnesota policy 1B.1 still states, “discrimination and harassment are not within the protections of academic freedom or free speech.” And the cops are everywhere, so please turn off your electronic devices NOW.

Besides, our concern today is not the constitutionality—in America at least—of these codes of “acceptable behavior” or “professional behavior” or “non-bullying behavior,” but the effect these codes have on communication when people invent new, “soft” code words to avoid giving offense, only to have those code words become offensive . . . the way these regulations thereby confuse thought and communication and prevent writers from “telling the truth.”

Admittedly, language always changes, and many language changes have nothing to do with political correctness (today banking, advertising, and agriculture are all referred to as “industries,” because that word has a positive connotation). Admittedly many words have multiple meanings. Admittedly sarcasm, which obscures meaning, has been with us for centuries. Admittedly America has been Puritan since the Mayflower landed (and political correctness is at its roots Puritan, both in the language it finds offensive and in its “holier than thou” pietism). And admittedly English has had a class prejudice ever since the Normans invaded (most obscenities are Anglo-Saxon peasant; the polite and thus acceptable equivalents are French or Latin upper class). Still, the process of banning certain words and semantically engineering the meaning of others to serve as substitutes for words which might cause feelings of inferiority, low self-esteem, or psychological harm has exacerbated linguistic uncertainty for a variety of reasons.

Several processes are operative here. First, of course, people seeking to speak the truth usually replace the banned pejorative with a neutral or even honorific word, producing, finally, confusion. As Richard Spears puts it in introducing his *Slang and Euphemism*, “Many slang terms, euphemisms, colloquial terms, and technical terms came into use so that people could avoid writing or saying prohibited terms for unpleasant subjects” (vii). Like, to pull some A words from his 437 pages of examples, *A-bomb* (not an atomic bomb, but a marijuana cigarette containing heroin), *academician* (a prostitute), *ace of spades* (the female genitals), *action* (sexual activity), *amp* (a drug capsule or tablet), *angel* (a male homosexual pederast), *apples* (female breasts), *arm* (penis), *artichoke* (debauched old woman), *ashes* (marijuana). That’s not what you thought those words meant? I am not surprised. Geoffrey Hughes notes in his book *Political Correct-ness*, “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” (19). So is the euphemism the old compliment, or a coded criticism? Better be careful when you talk about amps, angels, apples, arms and artichokes.

And not just those words. *Challenged*, for example. What does *challenged* mean since *crippled* was replaced by *handicapped*, which was replaced by *physically challenged*, now shortened to *challenged*? What do you mean by *challenged*? Should you even use that word? What does *disadvantaged* mean today? What about *gay*? “It has become impossible to describe our cheerful and lively friends as gay without risk of being misunderstood,” wrote Philip Howard way back in 1977 (34). But maybe we have now found a new euphemism for *gay* in *GLBT*, so perhaps *gay* just means *happy*, as a *pansy* is now maybe just a flower, since homosexuals are have not been *pansies* for years. Or maybe not. Who knows for sure? Is a *dyke* now just a wall protecting cropland from flooding? Maybe, but maybe not.

What does the word *special* mean when used today, now that people with *special needs* are just *special*? The definition of “special” in my 1979 *American Heritage Dictionary* is “surpassing what is common or usual; exceptional.” Today it might mean exactly the opposite. If we say to

someone today, “You’re special,” have we complimented *them* (better not say *him*, because *him* is sexist), which would be the old meaning of the term, or have we intimated that the person is in some sense handicapped? Does the word *exceptional* now mean *special*?

Or the word *companion*. If *mistress* and *lover*, *husband* and *wife*, *boyfriend* and *girlfriend* have been replaced by the gender-inclusive, nonheterosexual term *companion*, are we to think that sex is involved when someone introduces his/her “companion”? If some people use the word *guest* for *prisoner*, *inmate*, or *patient*, what do we mean when we invite *guests* for dinner?

Using the word *issue* to mean *problem* represents a more serious alteration of thought. We cannot admit that somebody is causing a *problem*, because that would cause a *problem* for them—and for us under the new regulations. So we have an *issue*. In the old days, a *problem* was something unequivocally bad that needed fixing; an *issue* was a topic debatable from both sides. Could be good, could be bad. So if someone today says, “Here’s the issue,” is that person saying “this thing is bad, fix it”; or is that person saying “this thing could be good, could need some adjusting, let’s talk about it”? I don’t know. And has *issue* meant *problem* long enough that we need a new word for *issue*? Maybe we should have a *situation* . . . or, how about this, an *opportunity*.

What does the word *like* mean today? My American students tell me that since you are not allowed to “dislike” much of anything, especially on line, they often use *like* to mean *dislike*. Maybe we’d best not use the word. Similarly, many people, students tell me, now use *diverse* as a code word for *colored* and thus a pejorative rather than the compliment P. C. types intend. Geoffrey Hughes reports the same use of *affirmative* in South Africa (98).

What do gestures mean? I am told by a reliable source that in Germany giving police the finger—visual speech which in America is covered under our First Amendment—is a finable offense . . . so some younger folks are substituting the thumbs up sign (more visual speech) for the finger. So what does the thumbs up mean?

So are *special*, *like*, *diverse*, and the thumbs up sign nice or not nice?

Euphemisms and redefinitions are one problem—oops, *issue*—precipitated by the speech cops. A second issue arises when people seeking to avoid giving offense invent new terms that make no sense to the rest of us. Many of them are so foggy as to be unintelligible except to insiders. Henry Bear and Christopher Cerf’s satirical *The Officially Politically Correct Dictionary and Handbook* contains dozens of such words . . . as well as their sources: *ambigenic*, *carbocentrism*, *coself*, *exfiltration*, *diagnostic misadventure*, *terminally inconvenienced*, *pedal sizism*, *she-ro*. And what the hell does *differently-abled* mean?

A different *issue* arises when the P. C. troops, using verbal violence to combat verbal violence, expand the meaning of the offensive words, strengthening their case by expanding the number of people whose behavior or attitudes are offensive. This is a subtle but, when you think about it, fairly common occurrence. Camille Paglia writes in her book *Sex, Art and American Culture*, “*homophobic* has a specific psychological meaning. . . . We cannot allow the word *homophobic* to be constantly used for anyone who says ‘I don’t like gay people’ or ‘I think homosexuality is immoral according to the Bible’ ” (275-76). But that’s what *homophobic* means these days, vastly increase-ing the number of homophobic people. It’s probably fair to say that today most people are guilty of *violence* and *assault* (verbal violence and verbal assault), of *hate* (disrespect of anything that you don’t like or that goes against your own beliefs), of *rape* (date

rape, spouse rape, acquaintance rape, etc.), of *homophobia*. Speaking on behalf of the activists, P. C. apologist Stanley Fish writes, “You Can Only Fight Discrimination with Discrimination” (70), but these reverse discriminators confuse the language as much as the coiners of code insults and euphemisms. Victims of discrimination can even redefine terms to mean exactly the opposite of what we thought they meant (*diversity*, even as the PC types define it, is *not* the inclusion of all cultures, but the inclusion of carefully selected cultures, and carefully selected aspects of those cultures. This phenomenon will be familiar to those who grew up listening to communist Newspeak or American corporate Doublespeak (“How Government, Business, Advertisers, and Others Use Language to Deceive You,” William Lutz subtitled his 1981 book on this subject).

I see several larger issues/problems/situations here. The first, of course, is that meanings change but texts do not. What do today’s students think when they encounter the 1934 musical *The Gay Divorcé*, starring Fred Astaire and Ginger Rogers? What do they think of T. S. Eliot’s presentation of Thomas á Becket in *Murder in the Cathedral* in the line “old Tom, gay Tom, Becket of London”? If the text is in the mind of the audience, Eliot’s text says St. Thomas á Becket is queer.

What about old texts that use words whose meaning has not changed? What happens to texts—so many of them classic—that use proscribed words, or then-innocent words that are now proscribed or best left unspoken? Many of the greatest texts speak to racist, sexist, bullyist matters in racist, sexist, bullyist terms. Should we ban *A Streetcar Named Desire* because it uses the word “Polack” in the line “I am not a Polack. I am a Pole”? Nat Hentoff devotes a full chapter of *Free Speech for Me—But Not for Thee* to “The Right to Read a Book with ‘Niggers’ in It,” focusing on one of the two classics I include in every Am. Lit. I class, *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*. (My other favorite is Ralph Ellison’s *Invisible Man*, with its immortal line, applicable to us all, “Keep this nigger running.” Ellison, as I hope you know, was *niger*, black, Negro, Afro-American, a person of color.) Today we are certainly a long way from Carl Sandburg’s position, expressed in his 1952 autobiography *Always the Young Strangers*:

There were names us kids liked to use. We liked them mostly because they sounded funny. A Jew was a “sheeny.” The Irish were “micks.” A Swede was a “snorky.” A Yankee was a “skinflint.” The Germans were “Dutch.” The Italians were “dagoes”. . . . I heard Irish boys say of themselves, “Us micks,” and Negroes speak of themselves as “Us niggers,” and one Swede boy to another, “Hello, snork.” When you hated and wanted to be mean, you said “goddam mick.” (281)

Only “goddam nigger” or “goddam snork,” Sandburg notes, had the boys reaching for bricks to throw. It is dangerous today to teach a “hard” text, despite what the text meant when it was written. As Hentoff notes, “minority students—and women of all colors—do believe that the First Amendment . . . must bend when hate speech is at issue. . . . Many white students, faculty members, and administrators are also convinced that speech must be limited if racism, sexism, and homophobia are to be extirpated in and out of the classroom. And that includes punishment—and if necessary—the banishment of professors infected with any or all of those viruses.” He devotes a large portion of his chapter “The Pall of Orthodoxy on the Nation’s Campuses” to the implementation of speech codes.

My second problem is homophones. Should we not use those words either? What do the words mean? Perhaps you heard about David Howard, a white aide to the black mayor Anthony Williams of Washington, D.C., who in 1999 was fired (okay, allowed to resign) for using the word “niggardly” in a private staff meeting regarding budget allocations, because the mayor interpreted the word as a racial slur. Here is the classic case of the meaning of the word being determined by the listener, not the speaker, with very extreme consequences. That episode was followed by others in university communities where students objected to professors’ use of that word, so the word disappeared from use . . . although I note in an Internet search several recent usages of the word, so perhaps we have reclaimed it.

My third issue is that people may be tempted simply to avoid the subject—which is probably the intent of the Political Correctivists. Perhaps erasing the word AIDS from public discourse will cure the disease. But admitting that a problem exists is the first step in solving it. That was, in fact, the argument made by feminists regarding “harassment”: if there is no word, there is no problem; we have to name the problem—oops, *issue*—so that we can solve it. That’s what they told us. But today we can’t identify anything as a *problem*, or give the problem a name because so doing would make people feel bad . . . so we’re never gonna solve those unidentified (unnamed) problems. “Deny, deny, deny,” advises Mr. Fixit in the film *Wag the Dog*. “Never underestimate the power of denial” was the sarcastic line in the film *American Beauty*, a film which examined the ugly under the superficial “say nice” life of modern America. Not naming the elephant in the room is the most obvious form of denial. Moreover, legally at least, silence betokens consent, so that in avoiding the *problem*, we become accessories to whatever it is we refuse to discuss.

The list of what is left undiscussed is longer than you might think. In her book *The Language Police*, Diane Ravitch reports having, over many years of studying and writing about the politics of education, stumbled upon “an elaborate, well-established protocol of beneficent censorship, quietly endorsed and broadly implemented by textbook publishers, testing agencies, professional associations, states, and the federal government” (3) which she calls the bland leading the bland. To the book she attaches a thirty-page appendix of banned words, usages, stereotypes, and topics, drawn from sources like the *Fairness Report for the ACT Assessment Tests 1999-2000*, *Fairness/Bias Review Guidelines for the Connecticut Mastery Test 2002*, and Holt, Rinehart and Winston School Department *Guidelines for the Treatment of People and Related Issues*. Banned words and terms include (a small sampling of the A and B words) *able-bodied*, *actress*, *aged*, *airman*, *anchorman*, *average working man*, *babe*, *backward*, *backwoodsman*, *beast*, *birth defect*, *bitch*, *blind*, *blind as a bat*, *blind leading the blind* . . . well, you get the idea. “Topics to avoid on tests” include AIDS, abortion, addiction, alcoholism, animal abuse, birth control, blizzards, cancer, Christmas, coming-out parties, and nudity. This is a lot of stuff not to talk about.

An article in the Minneapolis *Star Tribune* on January 4, 2015, titled “Just Don’t Call Me Old” warns against alienating the old folks with “words that carry negative connotations.” One of the words in question is “the F-word,” *facility*. The term *old folks home* disappeared from public discourse years ago, but now *facility* is now also unacceptable. The leading replacement candidate is *community*. Other words that are blacklisted are *elderly*, *mature adult*, and *senior citizen*. Our “Senior College” curriculum for retirees has been renamed “Gold College.”

*Disability* and *disease*, we are told, also sound “demeaning.” As do the terms used by some researchers to draw important distinctions, *young-old* and *old-old*. So what am I, folks? (And you’d better not demean or insult me by calling me an *old fart*.) Maybe just better not talk about it.

Professor Moleki Asante, chair of African American Studies at Temple, told reporter Jerry Adler, “There are times when I want to be very cautious about offending a feminist colleague, but I can’t find the right terms [to talk to her]” (54). If we want to offer a compliment but sense that we might risk being interpreted as offering an insult, and we are mindful of the codes on professional behavior and speech, what can we say? Or talk about? Two weeks ago, visiting writer Jim Heynen told me that he was advised at the College of St. Olaf not to talk to female students about the books they read because it might be construed as an unwelcomed sexual invitation. I once asked our harassment officer to tell me in advance what speech or behavior could get me into trouble, but she declined because “each situation is taken individually and in light of many considerations,” so she could not tell in advance what would be what. “Just say nice things,” she suggested. But today I don’t know what is a nice thing and what is a not nice thing. Even telling you how much I love your outfit might be interpreted the wrong way. So I don’t say much.

But people need to speak up. At least half the people in the world—members of all groups—are not nice, and that needs saying. Someone who “just says nice things” to and about everyone is lying at least half the time. The net result is that in P. C. nirvana, we don’t trust anything that anyone says, because our policies have mandated a generation of liars. (Which violates a commandment, if not the U. S. Constitution.) And he who praises everything praises nothing.

A final problem is that just saying nice things has not really improved self-esteem; it has in fact produced a wave of depression, suicide, and near-suicides. Camille Paglia writes, “Maybe identity comes through conflict. . . . It does not help you to develop your identity by putting a cushion between yourself and the hateful reality that’s out there” (285). Instead of feeling bullied by someone’s harsh words, follow the advice of one female student I overheard in the hall-way: “Just kick her in the ‘gina.”

I wanted to conclude this talk on an upbeat note by noting that the book *Little House on the Prairie*, purged from our local high school curriculum in October of 1998 because it is offensive, has returned to the curriculum. I have not been hauled into the dean’s office recently for teaching *Huck Finn*, *Invisible Man* and “Howl” (and *Deliverance* too) in my American Literature classes. Or for the book I used in freshman composition—*Growing Up in Minnesota*, published by the University of Minnesota Press—which contains both the words *nigger* and *honky*. Perhaps the police have backed off.

Or not. Just last Saturday the Minneapolis *StarTribune* reported in a front-page article that the St. Olaf College baseball season had been terminated because players were caught (on a social medium, Yik Yak) participating in an event that had involved “ridicule, harassment, and displays of servitude”—namely some team members serving other team members dinner in the school cafeteria—which violated the school’s hazing policy and ran counter to the school’s values.



So the questions remain: what do words mean these days? Are we the land of the free and brave? Do we say what we mean, and mean what we say? Can we talk candidly about things that matter? Or is Robert Hughes right when he writes, "Clearly there is no longer a free choice in the use of [even] neutral language . . . because of certain agendas which have developed" (286)? Are we in what Bruce Charleton has called a *Thought Prison* created by Political Correctness, able to say and think only what we hope are nice things? Are the *Gedanken* still *frei*?

Well, *we* have been here before, as Poles certainly appreciate.

Thank you, you have been a wonderful audience, very nice, and I truly appreciate the opportunity to speak to you today. Did I tell you how much I like your outfit?

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