

Language + Thought + Reform = doubleplusgood or unsmart bellyfeel?

In recent years, some efforts for language reform have sparked a debate about whether such measures have a meaningful impact or if they are superficial gestures of so-called virtue signaling. For example, The University of Southern California recently removed the term *field* from its curriculum because it may have racist connotations related to slavery (Heyward 2023). In other words, it is USC's view that referring any *field* of science or to do sociolinguistic *field work* could have implicit racist undertones and such language should be avoided. Similar discussions have also taken place in Sweden, e.g., the debate about *Vita havet* at Konstfack in Stockholm (Nyheter, SVT 2021). It is of interest here how new standards of language use emerge and who decides what words and constructions are racist, sexist or inappropriate in other ways.

In another example, the editors of the Associated Press (AP) Stylebook have caused controversy for a now deleted tweet which awkwardly voiced a basic misunderstanding of how nominalized adjectives work in English: "We recommend avoiding general and often dehumanizing 'the' labels such as ***the poor***, ***the mentally ill***, ***the French***, ***the disabled***, ***the college-educated***. Instead, use wording such as people with mental illnesses. And use these descriptions only when clearly relevant," (cf. Rawlinson 2023, our italics and emphasis). It turned out in the ensuing debate, however, that the French, for example, do not, in general, seem to mind being referred to as *the French*.

Overall, we recognize that language reform can be necessary, meaningful, and justified. Language reflects our culture(s) and worldview; careful and considerate use of language promotes inclusivity, avoids bias, and is an important action we all can take to ensure that all individuals are treated with respect and dignity.

However, not all language reform suggestions stand on solid ground; the reformers, though well-intentioned, may be more motivated by ideology than a desire to achieve real parity and clarity. While some changes seem superficially plausible, they are often not as logical and consistent as they may first seem. For example, in some style guides (cf. Hacker & Sommers, 2000: 269), the relative pronoun *that* is discouraged when the antecedent is a person, though this has no logical footing in the grammar of English and, in our view, indicates a calculated misreading of grammar, usage and/or the historical development of a language.

With the help of various style guides, language reference works and advice blogs, we discuss both the notably successful efforts of language reform (e.g., ignoring explicitly stating marital status by using *Ms.* rather than *Miss/Mrs.*) as well as what we consider to be less well-informed and perhaps

misguided efforts, i.e., efforts which can be questioned regarding the extent to which they actually promote clarity and or are potentially harmful in other ways.

References:

Hacker, D., & Sommers, N. (2000). *A pocket style manual*. Bedford/St. Martin's.

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Heyward, G. (2023, January 14). A USC office removes "field" from its curriculum, citing possible racist connotations. NPR. <https://www.npr.org/2023/01/14/1148470571/usc-office-removes-field-from-curriculum-racist>

Rawlinson, K. (2023, January 28). AP apologises and deletes widely mocked tweet about 'the French.' *The Guardian*. <https://www.theguardian.com/media/2023/jan/28/ap-issues-clarification-over-its-advice-not-to-use-term-the-french>