

Ray Honeyford

"Seeing Conspiracy in Language"

The writer, a former head teacher at a school in Bradford with a high percentage of immigrants, has sometimes been accused of racist attitudes. In this letter to a newspaper he attacks those who believe that forms of language which are not 'politically correct' should be changed. Are some people too sensitive? – The Daily Telegraph, 15 October 1991.

SIR – You report that the National Association of Probation Officers (Napo) is proposing to outlaw any language suspected of offending various minorities (Oct 14). They do so in the name of equal opportunities, and it is no surprise that they quote Marx in support of their case.

- 5 This is the same mentality which insists, in the name of equal opportunities, that there is a male chauvinist conspiracy against the girls in our schools – despite the fact that on every known criterion of educational success girls are now out-performing boys.
- It is also the mentality which forbids such words as blackboard, black coffee, and black looks – despite the fact that studies have shown that English is emphatically not a 'racist' language.
- 10 The vast majority of collocations involving the word 'black' are entirely neutral in their meaning, and have no reference whatsoever to black people, and for every one of such expressions which does carry a negative connotation there is one implying praise, for example "in the black," "the Black Madonna," "black gold."
- A similar case is the attempt to pervert language by insisting that homosexuals be described as
- 15 'gay' — despite the fact that in New York homosexuals are now insisting that they be described as 'queer.' This is, in fact, the mentality of the fanatic. It is no accident that totalitarian regimes invariably insist upon abolishing linguistic history, reconstructing the language and coercing the citizens into conformity. It is easy to dismiss as absurd cases
- 20 where languages are made to function as a simple vehicle for special pleading by pressure groups. But pressure groups can do a great deal of damage to human relationships and to free speech by attempting to control language. The appalling phenomenon of political correctness in America is largely the result of certain interest groups dictating what may or may not be said and how it may be said.
- When Napo has finished its present purge will it then direct its attention to the linguistic
- 25 xenophobia in such sinister expressions as 'welsh on a deal,' 'scotch the plan,' 'French leave,' 'Dutch courage,' and 'It's Greek to me'?
- Napo's antics have been causing concern for some time. Their latest foray into offensive absurdity confirms that suspicion.

**1. What attitude towards language does the writer attack and what are his reasons?
2. Is language which insults a group sometimes only harmless fun? Do some people just lack a sense of humour?**

3. Explain the expression *political correctness*.

4. Does it worry you when non-inclusive language is used, like *Schüler, Studenten* or *Politiker* in German? Does language like this create assumptions?